

# Improving Levels of Employee Engagement Among Student Services Professionals

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research was to study the impact of managers' roles in improving employee engagement through professional development programs and customized action plans among Merced College Student Services employees. Ultimately, the goal of the intervention was to increase levels of employee engagement among student services professionals to better thrive as a unit and for students to receive higher levels of customer service. The study was an action research study using a mixed-methods design. The participants for the qualitative one-on-one interviews were three managers, two classified professionals, and two faculty. The sampling was purposive. For the quantitative data collection, the participants of this action research study included the approximately 132 employees in the Student Services Division at Merced College.

Participants completed a pre-survey measuring their levels of employee engagement based on The Gallup Organization's 12 dimensions of employee engagement. The survey instrument measured 12 constructs and included 36 total items. Based on the results of the pre-survey, managers within the Student Services Division participated in two professional development workshops on employee engagement. The results of the qualitative data analysis resulted in manager-developed action plans, based on the three lowest constructs from the pre-survey, for each of the departments within the Student Services Division. The customized action plans were implemented over an approximately four-month period. Upon completion of the intervention, participants completed a post-survey to assess the impact of the interventions.

The results indicated that managers who participate in employee engagement professional development programs are able to effectively develop and implement action plans

as employee engagement champions within the workplace. The post-survey scores for participants of this study did not result in improved levels of employee engagement during the four-month intervention cycle. The findings of the action research study will help develop and refine solutions to continue to improve employee engagement within higher education and other organizations.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my beautiful, supportive, and encouraging wife, Summer, and to my incredibly talented, intelligent, and ambitious son, Conner. It is impossible to capture, in words, how much I have appreciated your patience and support throughout this entire program. I could not have done it without the two of you.

As a first generation college graduate, I would be remiss not to also dedicate my educational successes to the unwavering support and encouragement of my parents, Arnold and Alice. Thanks for sacrificing to make so many of my dreams a reality.

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## Chapter 1

*“The way your employees feel is the way your customers will feel.”*

–Sybil F. Stershic

Employee engagement is a relatively new concept related to human performances in the workplace. Dr. William Kahn (1990) first introduced the idea in his seminal piece, *Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work*. According to Tom Obyrne, CEO of A Great Place to Work (2013), many researchers interested in workplace experiences shifted their focus from employee satisfaction to employee engagement after Kahn’s work was published. Locke (1976, p. 1304), defines employee satisfaction as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (as cited by Barakat, Isabella, Boaventura, & Mazzon, 2016). In contrast, Kahn provided one of the first known definitions of engagement in the workplace by conceptualizing personal engagement as both being employed in a specific position and the expression of one’s preferred self in task behaviors. He referred to engagement as a psychological state empowering employees to drive personal energies into the physical, cognitive, and emotional roles they occupy within the workplace. Employee engagement is a function of the passion and energy employees provide to the workplace to give their best to serve the customer (Cook, 2008).

To further expand, employee engagement is not transactional, which refers to the act of completing a process, action, or task. Instead, it is transformational, encompassing the emotional, behavioral and relational side of human behavior in the workplace. The

focus is on making a meaningful connection between employees and organizations (Obyrne, 2013).

The past several decades have seen an explosion of research activity and heightened interest in employee engagement among consultants, organizations, and management scholars (Gruman & Saks, 2008). In particular, the Gallup Organization has conducted extensive work on employee engagement across a wide range of industries. Based on data from more than one million employees worldwide, Gallup identified a number of key factors that are associated with high levels of workplace engagement, including a clear understanding of work expectations, a sense of connectedness to the organization's mission, respect for individual employees' opinions and talents, opportunities to develop professionally, recognition of good work, supportive supervisors and colleagues, and access to the material resources necessary for job success (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Gallup's research suggests these elements are associated with improved performance in the workplace (Wagner & Harter, 2006), underscoring their importance. Additionally, Cook (2008) asserted that highly engaged employees felt trusted, valued, and empowered—emotionally committed and involved with high levels of motivation and enthusiasm for the organization.

According to the Gallup Organization's *2017 State of the American Workplace Report* (2017) only 33 percent of U.S. employees are engaged at work with 16 percent actively disengaged and the remaining 51 percent of employees not engaged. Specific to higher education, Jaschik and Lederman (2015) found that only 34 percent of faculty were engaged in their job compared to 52 percent disengaged and 14 percent actively disengaged. The *2015 Inside Higher Ed Survey of College and University Faculty*

*Workplace Engagement*, conducted by Jaschik and Lederman (2015) found full-time faculty (34%) to be more engaged than part-time faculty (30%). The report also found faculty at public institutions to have lower levels of engagement than those at private institutions, 31 percent versus 36 percent, respectively. Among public associate institutions (i.e. two-year community colleges) only 32 percent of full-time faculty were engaged. Finally, for institutions with enrollments of 5,000 to 10,000 students, such as Merced College (the setting of the current study), only 32 percent of faculty were found to be engaged. Jaschik and Lederman's (2015) work focused on describing instructional staff engagement, and they did not include other employee groups in their survey. While some research exists on job satisfaction and burnout from the field, especially related to entry-level student affairs professionals (Tull, 2006), minimal inquiries have focused on engagement specific to staff and management employee classifications in higher education.

### **Organizational Benefits from Highly Engaged Employees**

So, you might already be asking is employee engagement just another set of crafty human performance buzz words and just another fad among human resource development professionals? And more importantly, are there real benefits of highly engaged workforces to organizations?

An emerging line of research has indicated there are real benefits. Macey and Schneider (2008) suggested that high levels of employee engagement are associated with improved financial performance as well as customer satisfaction. Gallup's research suggests "higher levels of team engagement equates to 12 percent higher customer scores than those in the bottom tier" (Wagner & Harter, 2006, p. xv). Also, consistent with the

bottom-line approach, companies [and organizations] with engaged employees have been shown to have higher customer service scores, less absenteeism, fewer accidents in the workplace, increased productivity, and a much higher sense of creativity (Wagner & Harter, 2006). In response, companies and organizations spend millions to motivate employees and create a culture of highly productive and engaged employees. According to the Association for Talent Development (2013), U.S. organizations spent \$164.2 billion on employee learning and development in 2012 as noted in the findings from their *2013 State of the Industry* report.

Particular to higher education, minimal formal research has examined the organizational benefits of employee engagement. Daniels (2016) noted research on employee engagement specific to higher education is limited, and began to contribute to that gap with a study in the context of Christian higher education. The qualitative study, which included 53 interviews between two universities, examined shared commonalities of engaged employees. The study found the themes of mission, community, empowered human resource departments, and a sense of positive momentum were contributors to employees' high levels of engagement within the workplace. Other studies in higher education, albeit international, identified employee productivity (Hanaysha, 2016) and meaningfulness (Basit & Arshad, 2015) as benefits to both the organizations and the employees. Private for-profit companies have conducted some research on this topic as well. Cornerstone and Ellucian (2016) examined employee engagement among 469 workers at various higher education institutions and found increased retention, student success rates, and student support by staff are all benefits of higher levels of employee engagement.

Engaged employees are 27 percent less likely to be absent in the workplace compared to those who are actively disengaged (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Cornerstone and Ellucian (2016) found that employee disengagement in higher education was correlated with high levels of turnover for faculty (71%) as well as staff (80%), which accounted for nearly one-third of the total respondents. According to Wagner and Harter (2006) higher levels of employee engagement can lead to 12 percent higher customer service scores within organizations. The Gallup Organization's *2017 State of the American Workplace Report* (2017) indicated actively disengaged employees negatively affect success and growth by stealing in the workplace, adversely influencing coworkers, absenteeism, and poor customer service. "Gallup estimates that actively disengaged employees cost the U.S. \$483 billion to \$605 billion each year in lost productivity" (p.19).

With the increased demand on colleges to provide quality service as well as to compete with other institutions of higher education, including private for-profit colleges, increasing levels of employee engagement is a low-cost high-impact strategy worth exploring. With scarce resources and reduced government funding support, community colleges in particular have been more commonly embracing the business culture's bottom line approach with more of a focus on generating revenue and increasing efficiencies or cutting non-essential costs (Levin, 2005).

### **College Students as Consumers**

Higher education students have been increasingly demanding quality customer service. As college costs have skyrocketed, students are more attentive to the value they receive from their institution in exchange for paying tuition, as well as the gaps between

service expectations and the actual services they are provided (Darlaston-Jones, Pike, Cohen, Young, Haunold & Drew, 2003). For the institution, quality services and support programs for students should be embedded in all areas of student services, especially the interaction of front-line employees with students. (Polycarpou, 2007). Specific to higher education, the literature review for this proposal did not identify any studies examining front-line employees (i.e., those working in support services areas with direct contact with students) and their engagement in the workplace. Nevertheless, research in other settings has shown that front-line employees are often less engaged to the mission and purpose of the organization, yet these are the employees who most often interacted with customers, leaving a gap in quality services (Wagner & Harter, 2006).

Higher education leaders have become aware of this increased consumerist orientation of students and the pressure to meet their needs and expectations. Moreover, many institutions have begun to find ways to capitalize on the opportunity to distinguish themselves from their competitors, including providing responsive and effective customer service (Polycarpou, 2007). To optimally support students, “academic institutions must implement quality improvement strategies, systems and standards, achieving provision of excellent service quality and student satisfaction through systematic measurement of their performance” (Polycarpou, 2007, p. 1). Further, colleges have begun to recognize to improve student satisfaction they must first focus on understanding and improving the culture of the organization by increasing the overall satisfaction and attitude of its employees.

Institution type and context likely affects students’ priorities and satisfaction, although according to Zhai (2012), “research on student satisfaction in the community



colleges, where the student body is comparatively more diverse, is relatively sparse” (p.47). However, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, a private-for-profit company in the United States, has tracked and reported student satisfaction among four-year and two-year, public and private institutions for nearly 40 years. The *2014 National Research Report*, specific to community colleges, indicated students at two-year public colleges place a significant level of importance on advising and student support services as an indicator of overall satisfaction (Bryant & Bodfish, 2014). According to the report, colleges with overall higher satisfaction rates are providing students with individualized approaches and higher quality academic experiences. While the *2017 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report*, conducted by Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, found that 64 percent of students at two-year community and technical colleges were satisfied, it noted the respondents reflected the opinions of predominately adult learners who tend to have higher levels of satisfaction and enrollees’ who placed a high priority on affordability (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2017). More notably, perhaps as it relates to this dissertation, the report indicated student experience, specifically instructional effectiveness, academic advising, registration effectiveness, concern for individual, and admissions and financial aid, as the top five indicators of student satisfaction at two-year community and technical colleges. These indicators are all elements of the customer service experience as it relates to student satisfaction at the college-level.

### **Local and Personal Context**

Founded in 1962, the Merced Community College District (MCCD) has served as a mid-size college within the California Community College System enrolling more than 14,000 students on an annual basis and employing approximately 480 permanent

classified professionals, faculty members, and administrators/managers. Currently, I am the Superintendent/President of Merced College. However, from June 2013 through January 2017, I served as the Merced College (MC) Vice President of Student Services (VPSS). In this role I had responsibility for nine managerial direct reports: two student services deans and seven directors. As the Superintendent/President, I still maintain general administrative oversight of this division; thus, I have a vested interest in ensuring the highest quality service is provided to our students through student support services and programs. As a part of this study, which focused on improving employee engagement in the Student Services Division, I worked with the newly appointed VPSS as a strategic partner.

With the responsibility to provide comprehensive student support services and programs, all MCCD students have depended on the Student Services Division and employees to provide quality service to support them in achieving their educational goals. The Division has used 15 departments and programs to carry out these efforts including financial aid, admissions and records, student equity, disabled student services, special programs and services, international student services, outreach and recruitment, career and transfer services, academic support and tutorial services, athletic programs, student government, counseling, and student health services. The Student Services Division has employed approximately 132 employees, including faculty members, classified professional staff, and administrators/managers to conduct its work.

With a diverse staff and a myriad of student support services, programs, and departments, I have often strategized on how to best connect and engage the workforce in Student Services to conduct the mission of supporting and helping students attain their

educational goals. I have served in my current role as Superintendent/President for approximately 8 months and previously served as the VPSS for approximately two and a half years. During my first year at the VPSS, I conducted a “listening tour” to gain a perspective of the culture and organizational environment of the division. The tour included meeting one-on-one with each employee within the division for a minimum of 30 minutes. During the one-on-one meetings, I asked all of the employees about their respective roles, what they liked and disliked about their job, what they liked and disliked about working in the Student Services Division, how they would improve services to students, and what areas needed the most improvement. The feedback was candid, unfiltered, and enlightening.

Several concerns/issues started to emerge. Employees were expressing concerns such as a lack of morale, a disconnect among the employees of student services because of their differing roles, a lack of connection with the overall mission of the College, and an overall lack of commitment to the team. Many shared other concerns such as a need for additional resources to do their jobs better, a lack of appreciation for the opportunity to serve students, a feeling of isolation between departments and colleagues, and a need for more professional development. It was clear I needed to focus on morale and employee engagement during my first few years to improve services to students. As a result of the listening tour, the goal became evident: to focus on employee engagement and, to specifically, increase the level of employee engagement among staff, faculty members, and managers in the MC Student Services Division to improve overall support and services to students.

As a part of their global study of employee performance and motivation described

in the introduction to this chapter, the Gallup Organization identified twelve elements of work life as critical factors that affect employee performance in the workplace (Wagner & Harter, 2006), which included the following:

- (a) Knowing expectations at work
- (b) Having the materials and equipment needed to do their jobs
- (c) Having the opportunity to do what they do best every day
- (d) Receiving regular recognition or praise for doing good work
- (e) Someone at work caring about them as a person
- (f) Someone at work encouraging their development
- (g) Feeling their opinion seems to count
- (h) Connecting to the mission or purpose of the organization in respect to their specific role or job
- (i) Feeling their associates or peers are committed to quality work
- (j) Having a best friend at work
- (k) Someone at work talks to them about progress
- (l) Having the opportunities at work to learn and grow

Wagner and Harter asserted the Gallup research showed there was a relation between the aforementioned elements and employees' increased performance in the workplace. I soon realized that many of Gallup's elements of employee engagement were aligned with the concerns/issues that surfaced as a result of the "listening tour" with the employees in the Student Services Division. Thus, I concluded that not only would the workforce benefit from increased levels of employee engagement, on multiple levels, but the

students of Merced College would also benefit from a highly engaged workforce among student services professionals.

Over the years, Merced College has conducted numerous student satisfaction and student engagement surveys. The *Merced College 2006 Student Satisfaction Survey* indicated, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being very satisfied and 1 being very dissatisfied, that students were somewhere in the middle with a score of 3.81 when asked about levels of satisfaction with customer service among college staff. As part of the *Community Colleges Survey of Student Engagement 2017 Cohort Survey*, Merced College students were asked to rate their overall satisfaction as they related to student support services and only 35% were very satisfied with 65% stating they were either only somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied. Finally, the *Merced College Attrition Survey* (See Table 1), sent to students who dropped all classes within the first two weeks of the fall semester for the past five years, demonstrates that many students fall into the category of very unsatisfied, somewhat unsatisfied, and neither satisfied or dissatisfied.

Table 1

*Merced College Attrition Survey Trends*

Term	Very unsatisfied	Somewhat unsatisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N/A	Avg	N
F2013	2.94%	5.88%	29.41%	29.41%	32.35%	0.00%	3.82	34
F2014	3.51%	8.77%	17.54%	47.37%	19.30%	3.51%	3.73	57
F2015	6.25%	25.00%	12.50%	34.38%	21.88%	0.00%	3.41	32
F2016	4.65%	11.63%	30.23%	32.56%	16.28%	4.65%	3.46	43
F2017	9.29%	10.00%	17.86%	34.29%	17.86%	10.71%	3.46	140

The average student satisfaction score, with 1 being very unsatisfied and 5 being very

satisfied, has declined in the past five years from a score of 3.82 in fall 2013 to a score of 3.46 in fall 2017. In the fall of 2017, approximately 37 percent of students identified as either neutral (neither satisfied or dissatisfied), somewhat unsatisfied, or very unsatisfied.

It is anticipated that higher levels of employee engagement in the MC Student Services Division will benefit the division on multiple levels, such as improved productivity, commitment to the organization, reduced turnover, and more, and improve the support services provided to students by employees within the division. With scarce resources and increased demand to provide quality services to students in higher education, I propose an innovation to increase the levels of employee engagement among the workforce in the MC Student Services Division. By increasing the level of employee engagement, the overall support services to students should also be improved.

### **Purpose and Significance of Study**

This action research study sought to foster change by focusing on what existing research identifies as a key cause of organizational performance and student satisfaction: professional employee engagement. The purpose of this action research was to study the impact of managers' roles in improving employee engagement through professional development programs and customized action plans among Merced College Student Services employees.

Ultimately, by increasing levels of employee engagement within the Student Services Division at Merced College, the division will thrive as a unit and students will receive higher levels of customer service, which will have subsequent influences on student success and other completion metrics for students in higher education.

## **Research Questions**

This study was designed to investigate two research questions that address the dissertation problem of practice. The first research question focused the development of programs, services, and/or best practices to improve employee engagement. The second question focused on measuring improvement interventions related to the elements of employee engagement to improve supports and services provided by employees of the division to students.

The research questions were:

- RQ 1: What factors and best practices will help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College?
- RQ 2: How and to what extent does manager interventions improve employee engagement among student services professionals?
- Do professional development programs adequately equip managers to become employee engagement champions?
  - Do customized employee engagement action plans, developed by managers within the Student Services Division, lead to improving targeted constructs of employee engagement?

## **Definition of Relevant Terms**

The following terms, used throughout the dissertation proposal, are standard definitions for context within the study:

*Employee*: individuals who work both part-time and full-time for wages or salary at the non-executive level, including management, classified professionals, and faculty.

*Front-line employees:* those working in areas with direct contact with customers  
(students)

*Classified professionals:* staff-level employees paid an hourly rate with specific job duties and responsibilities.

*Faculty:* instructional and non-instructional certificated employees assigned to teaching and/or counseling at the college level.

*Management:* employees with direct oversight of programs and employees.

*Engaged:* an employee who works with passion, enthusiastic about their work, and profoundly connected to the work and mission of the organization (Cook, 2008; Kahn, 1990).

*Disengaged:* an employee who is “checked-out” and emotionally disconnected from the workplace and less likely to go “above and beyond” for the organization (Kahn, 1990).

*Actively disengaged:* an employee who is dissatisfied, emotionally disconnected from their work, and likely to harm or hinder workplace performance (Kahn, 1990).

## **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. In this chapter, I highlighted the broader perspectives of employee engagement, the organizational contexts and purposes of employee engagement in the workplace, the applicability of employee engagement in higher education, the research questions, and significance of this study.

My review of the relevant research in Chapter 2 is related to employee engagement, including the definitions of employee engagement, effects of employee engagement on organizations, perceived benefits of higher levels of employee engagement, and key elements of employee engagement in the workplace. I also explain



the primary theoretical perspective that serve as the framework of the study's design, Kahn's Theory of Employee Engagement, used to determine and assess employee engagement levels among the student services practitioners and methods to intervene and improve lower levels of engagement.

In Chapter 3, I outline the study methodology. I discuss the contextual setting and provide a description of the participants within the study. Part of this chapter includes a summary of the previous cycles and iterations of this problem of practice, which helped develop the larger scope of this dissertation proposal. I provide an overview of the research design as an action research project and mixed methods design approach. Both data collection methods are detailed and aligned with the problem of practice research questions with a description of the data analysis process. Finally, the problem of practice innovation is summarized in detail with the timeline and action steps for the study.

Chapter 4 provides the data analyses and results from this action research study. The mixed methods data sources included employee interviews and a pre-test post-test employee survey. Organized by the research questions, I provide an analysis of the results from the qualitative interview questions and the pre-test post-test employee surveys. The first section includes results from the qualitative data and assertions based on the themes related to the factors and best practices to help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College. The second section includes the results from the quantitative data, including an analyses from the pre-test post-test surveys.

Finally, Chapter Five concludes this study by summarizing the results with relation to the literature, lessons learned, implications for action and research, limitations, study validity, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, I highlighted the broader perspectives of employee engagement, the organizational contexts and purposes of employee engagement in the workplace, and the applicability of employee engagement in higher education. Specifically, I presented the linkages between higher levels of employee engagement to increase customer satisfaction and students as consumers.

In this chapter, I have begun by reviewing relevant research related to employee engagement, including the definitions of employee engagement, effects of employee engagement on organizations, perceived benefits of higher levels of employee engagement, and key elements of employee engagement in the workplace. In the second section, I have provided the theoretical perspective that serves as the framework of the study's design, Kahn's (1990) Theory of Employee Engagement—used to determine and assess employee engagement levels among the student services practitioners and methods to intervene and improve lower levels of engagement.

#### **Relevant Literature on Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement, while relatively new, has been a topic of high interest among human resource development professionals. A simple Google search revealed more than 9.7 million results on this topic. Since Kahn's (1990) initial introduction of employee engagement, researchers have studied multiple constructs and definitions, effects on employee retention, productivity, and quality output in a myriad of contexts and applications. Authors, experts, researchers, and consultant groups have developed professional development models, distinctive human resources tools, and trendy

interventions for organizations to address gaps in employee engagement (Shuck & Reio, 2011). With relatively little research directly related to employee engagement in higher education, particularly among student services practitioners, the following literature review draws from studies conducted in various contexts and differing types of organizations, which may be applicable to higher education.

As previously noted in Chapter 1, Daniels (2016) noted research on employee engagement specific to higher education is limited, and contributed to filling this gap with a study in the context of Christian higher education. The qualitative study of employees of two universities examined shared commonalities of engaged employees. The study found the themes of mission, community, empowered human resource departments, and a sense of positive momentum were contributors to employees' high levels of engagement within the workplace.

Other studies in higher education, albeit international, identified employee productivity (Hanaysha, 2016) and meaningfulness (Basit & Arshad, 2015) as benefits to both the organizations and the employees that result when engagement is high. Private for-profit companies in the postsecondary sector have conducted some research on this topic as well. Cornerstone and Ellucian (2016) examined employee engagement among 469 workers at various higher education institutions and found increased retention, student success rates, and student support by staff are all benefits of higher levels of employee engagement.

**Defining Employee Engagement.** Macey and Schneider (2008) and Shuck and Wollard (2010) found that definitions of employee engagement lacked consistency and purpose across fields, but asserted this was fairly typical with the development of early

constructs (as cited in Shuck & Reio, 2011). Many scholars, however, have begun to develop and provide analogous constructs defining employee engagement providing a more uniform approach in connecting human resource development concerns with workplace engagement. As demonstrated in Table 2 (Dagher, Chapa, & Junaid, 2015), many scholars have defined employee engagement with distinct commonalities and similar constructs.

Table 2

*Definitions of Employee Engagement*

Author(s)	Definition of employee engagement
Kahn (1990)	“Harnessing of organizations members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances”
Maslach <i>et al.</i> (2001)	“A persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment”
Rothbard (2001)	Attention: “[...] the cognitive availability and the amount of time one spends thinking about a role” and absorption: “[...] the intensity of one’s focus on a role”
Dvir <i>et al.</i> (2002)	“High levels of activity, initiative, and responsibility”
Harter <i>et al.</i> (2003)	“An employee’s involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work”
Colbert <i>et al.</i> (2004)	“High internal motivational state”
Wellins and Concelman (2005)	“The illusive force that motivates employees to higher (or lower) levels of performance”
Erickson (2005)	“Engagement is about passion and commitment – the willingness to invest oneself and expend one’s discretionary effort to help the employer succeed”
Mathieu <i>et al.</i> (2006)	“Experience of authority and responsibility”
Bakker and Demerouti (2008)	“Engaged employees have high levels of energy and are enthusiastic about their work”
Bakker and Demerouti (2008)	“Engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work activities, and they see themselves as able to deal well with the demands of their jobs”
Shimazu and Schaufeli (2009)	“A unique concept that is best predicted by job resources and personal resources and it predictive of psychological/

physical health, proactive, organizational behavior, and job performance”

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*Note.* Reprinted from “The historical evolution of employee engagement and self-efficacy constructs: An empirical examination in a non-western country,” by Dagher, G. K., Chapa, O., & Junaid, N. (2015). *Journal of Management History*, 21(2), 232. Copyright 2015 by publisher.

For purposes of this study, I primarily draw from Kahn’s definition of employee engagement, because it has served as one of the most foundational definitions of the term among scholarly literature today with more than 1,800 citations (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Many scholars, since Kahn’s original study, have used his definition as part of their research and, while employee engagement has only been studied in the last twenty-five years or so, there are numerous definitions.

Based on two qualitative, theory-generating studies of summer camp counselors and architecture firm employees, Kahn (1990) defined employee engagement in terms of personal engagement or disengagement. He found that personal engagement was the connection of individuals to their work as well as their expression of themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in the workplace. By comparison, personal disengagement was the uncoupling of individuals from work roles as well as withdrawing and defending their physical, cognitive, or emotional role in the workplace.

As previously noted, few specific scholarly studies have been completed on the benefits of employee engagement in higher education, but for the ones identified, Kahn’s (1990) definition is a commonly referred to as a primary source (e.g., Basit & Arshad, 2015; Daniels, 2016). Further, since Merced College is a public two-year college, I also relied on literature in the public sector to find commonly used definitions of employee engagement. Similarly, several public sector studies have referred to Kahn’s (1990)

research as a primary definition (Agrawal, 2015; Ibrahim & Falasi, 2014) and conceptualizing component (Jin, 2017) of their research.

Many scholars build upon Kahn's definition to link work engagement with one's psychological presence and emotional commitment in the workplace (Jeung, 2011; Luthens, 2002; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford 2010; Rothbard, 2001; Saks & Gruman, 2008). Rothbard (2001), for example, built on Kahn's definition to propose that work engagement can be thought of as "one's psychological presence in or focus on role activities" (p. 656). Rothbard asserted personal engagement occurred when the 'preferred self' was expressed harmoniously with employment and task behaviors which promoted links to work and to others, individual presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active role performances. Finally, as later expanded upon, Kahn's definition links to conditions in which people personally engage and disengage in the workplace, which can be mapped to contextual activities, individual conditions, and social environments in the workplace (Kahn, 1990)—all of which align with my problem of practice and intervention.

**The Effects of Employee Engagement.** The Gallup Organization assembled social scientists to study and synthesize the results of more than 1 million employee interviews in its database to identify which aspects of work were most influential and powerful to explain workers' motivations in the workplace (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Gallup's research results showed organizations with highly engaged employees had more enthusiastic employees, higher customer service satisfaction, less employee turnover, reduced absenteeism, fewer accidents in the workplace, increased productivity, and increased creativity.

Employee engagement has contributed to many positive traits of individuals' well-being, including improved health, job satisfaction, commitment, and financial and personal performance (Besieux et al., 2013; Mauno et al., 2007; May et al., 2004; Salanova et al., 2005. as cited in Besieux et al., 2015). Organizations have used employee engagement to conceptualize and measure the effects of human capital to improve employee satisfaction, commitment, intrinsic motivation, contribution, and the psychological contract to recognize the overall influence of emotions and rationality in the workplace (McBain, 2007).

Research results have highlighted many perceived benefits of highly engaged employees. Through a comprehensive literature review study, Eldor (2016) found organizations with high levels of employee engagement had coherent expressions of persistence, vigor, dedication, enthusiasm, and alertness among their workforces and provided the intrinsic benefits to their employees that were not easily obtained through other performance management concepts. In their book *Employee Engagement Through Effective Performance Management*, Mone and London (2010) highlighted higher levels of performance, through sustained high levels of employee engagement, were a key benefit of employee engagement as it related to performance management in the workplace. Mone and London (2010) asserted employee engagement intertwines individuals' physical, emotional, and cognitive connectedness with facets of their lives, including work, personal life, and community. Further, Eldor (2016) determined through a literature review of theoretical models of employee engagement there was a nexus between organizational needs and the mutual needs of its employees.



The *Talent Management Essentials*, a comprehensive series of “best practices” and evidence-based practice by scholars Macey, Schneider, Barbera, and Young (2009), indicated engaged employees gave an organization more than they typically had to offer otherwise, and that as a result, suggested organizations with an engaged workforce were more productive overall. Additionally, the results from a literature review study of the different dimensions of employee engagement by Mehta and Mehta (2013) indicated engaged employees were overall more productive and they typically remained highly loyal to their organizations.

Mehta and Mehta’s (2013) comprehensive literature review of the different dimensions of employee engagement also suggested organizations with highly engaged workforces were more profitable compared to those with low levels of employee engagement giving them a competitive advantage among customers. In an analysis of literature related to the added value of employee engagement as a human resources development practice, Eldor (2016) found organizations with highly engaged workforces promoted a competitive edge. In its meta-analysis of the employee engagement research, the Gallup Organization concluded that organizations with high levels of engagement outperformed their competitors by nearly 18 percent, and, overall, progressed at a substantially higher rate than their peers (Wagner & Harter, 2006).

Research results have also shown highly engaged workforces were more satisfied with their jobs (Eldor, 2016; Kamalanabhan & Mayuri, 2009). Studying information technology professionals employed at a private firm in India, Kamalanabhan and Mayuri (2009) found a high correlation between job satisfaction and higher levels of employee engagement. Through Eldor’s (2016) literature and theoretical model research,

engagement was found to provide employees with a greater sense of overall well-being and satisfaction with life, providing them a sense of meaningfulness, challenge, self-efficacy, and fulfillment.

**Key Elements of Engagement.** Organizations and scholars have paid considerable attention to identifying and understanding the factors that contribute to improving employee engagement. The workplace context is critical. Through Gallup's extensive analyses of more than 1 million employee interviews, 12 factors of work life emerged as constructs of employee engagement in the workplace (Wagner & Harter, 2006). The 12 elements emerging from the research can be viewed as the employees of an organization stating "if you do these things for us, then we'll do what the company needs to be successful" (Wagner & Harter, p. *xi*). The authors indicated the following 12 elements emerged as those that topped the list with respect to employee engagement:

- (a) "I know what is expected of me at work" (*xi*).
- (b) "I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right" (*xi*).
- (c) "At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day" (*xi*).
- (d) "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work" (*xi*).
- (e) "My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person" (*xi*).
- (f) "There is someone at work who encourages my development" (*xi*).
- (g) "At work, my opinion seems to count" (*xi*).
- (h) "The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important" (*xii*).

- (i) “My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work”  
(*xii*).
- (j) “I have a best friend at work” (*xii*).
- (k) “In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress”  
(*xii*).
- (l) “This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow” (*xii*).

Additionally, a number of studies have emphasized that an organization’s leadership is critical to employee engagement. Xu and Cooper Thomas’ (2011) research examined the theoretical framework of leadership as a key antecedent to investigate how organizations work to develop high levels of employee engagement and identified three general leadership behaviors, identified as supports team, performs effectively, and displays integrity, were drivers of employee engagement. They asserted that leadership behaviors which were supportive of team development were the strongest predicting elements of engagement among employees. Positional leadership, which is leadership solely based on an individual’s role or position, was also identified as a key element of higher engagement. As noted later in this chapter, the Merced College Student Services Division leadership team played a critical role in this study’s innovation and a nexus to improving lower levels of employee engagement among division employees.

Transformational leadership, which is characterized by transforming the mindset of the individual towards achieving team and organizational goals (Avolio et al., 1988; Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1990, as cited by Besieux, 2015), has been studied extensively in regards to its influence on employee engagement (Besieux, 2015). Xu and Thomas Cooper (2011) found leaders who supported, invested, and developed team

members contributed to higher levels of employee engagement in the workplace. Additionally, their research indicated task-oriented behaviors, such as resolving complex problems and focusing effort on specific job tasks, increased follower engagement among employees. Shuck and Wollard (2008) studied employee engagement and concluded great managers sought to bring out the best in their employees and inspired their drive and engagement in the workplace. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) posited that great leaders inspired, provided a sense of clarity, encouraged flexibility and creativity, gave praise, attended to employees' needs, and worked through emotions using their primal leadership instincts in the workplace. Leaders achieved this by exhibiting integrity, transparent communication, high ethical standards, good decision-making, and engaging employees in delivering performances (Xu & Cooper, 2011).

### **Kahn's Theory of Engagement**

As discussed earlier in this Chapter, Kahn (1990) defined engagement as an employee's connection to their work as well as the ability to express oneself physically, cognitively, and emotionally in the workplace. Building on this definition to better understand how and why employee engagement develops, Kahn (1990) posited that individuals used varying degrees of their selves in work performances. Kahn's ethnographic study of summer camp counselors and members of an architecture firm served as the catalyst for the three psychological conditions which serve as the foundation of Kahn's theory of engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. The author determined that people respond in different ways by either giving more or less of themselves in the workplace based on their personal experiences in their respective roles. To this end, Kahn found that if the three key conditions were met in the work

environment, then individuals were better able to engage in specific task behaviors in the workplace.

The first psychological condition of the theory, meaningfulness, “can be seen as a feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of one’s self in a currency of physical, cognitive, or emotional energy” (pp.703-704). Meaningfulness was realized when people felt worthwhile, useful, and appreciated. Kahn identified three factors influencing psychological meaningfulness: task characteristics, role characteristics, and work interactions. Meaningful tasks, for example, included working on complex projects to develop new skills and allow employees to learn something new, growing professionally, and building new competencies. Work roles that influenced psychological meaningfulness included identities linked to their respective positions as well as the level of status or influence associated with their role. Kahn claimed interpersonal interactions with peers and clients influenced psychological meaningfulness, particularly meaningful interactions that promoted elements of self-respect, self-appreciation, and self-worth.

The second psychological condition of the theory, safety, was summarized as being able to express or show one’s self without experiencing adverse consequences related to self-image, status, or career. “People felt safe in situations in which they trusted that they would not suffer for their personal engagement” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). Kahn identified four factors influencing psychological safety: interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management style and process, and organizational norms. Strong interpersonal relationships provided for the development of trust and support and allowed for flexibility to try new things and approaches without the fear of

consequences if they were not successful. Group and intergroup dynamics referred to the unofficial roles of individuals, unspoken alliances, and implicit roles assumed by individuals. Kahn also identified supportive, resilient, and clarifying management styles and processes as a psychological safety net contributing to engagement. His research found that organizational norms provided psychological safety through shared expectations of general behaviors and reactions to each other.

The third, and final, psychological condition of the theory, availability, was “the sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment” (p. 714). Kahn found availability was related to individuals’ readiness to engage based on four types of distractions influencing psychological availability: depletion of physical energy, depletion of emotional energy, individual insecurity, and outside lives. Individuals became depleted when there was a lack of physical energy, strength, and readiness; thus, causing personal disengagement. Kahn determined emotional energy influenced psychological availability by employing and expressing individuals’ selves in tasks. Finally, psychological availability was influenced by how secure individuals felt in the workplace and the influence of their outside lives and investment in non-work events.

**Studies Related to Kahn’s Theory of Engagement.** The theory of engagement has been applied to various contexts, including the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Although very few specific empirical studies have been completed based on Kahn’s theory of engagement in higher education (Basit & Arshad, 2015; Daniels 2016; Ellucian, 2016; Hanaysha, 2016), the theory has been applied extensively to educational and public

sectors to better understand employee engagement as a driver of organizational performance.

At least one study used the theory of engagement in the context of the higher education sector to study how to use it as a method to improve employee productivity (Hanaysha, 2015). By adopting the engagement dimensions of Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) who used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which was aligned with Kahn's theory, employee engagement dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption were measured. Studying the effects of employee engagement on productivity in the workplace, it was discovered that work engagement substantially contributed to increased employee productivity in higher education work settings. The results suggest that public educational institutions, such as Merced College, should assess levels of employee engagement to better understand their workforce with the goal of implementing suitable intervention strategies to overcome organizational issues (Hanaysha, 2015).

Similar to public higher education, Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement has also been studied in the context of public health care. Using Kahn's multidimensional framework of employee engagement, Shuck and Reio (2014) conducted a study of health care employees from the United States, Canada, and Japan to assess the psychological workplace climate in relation to employee engagement. Using the 18-item Job Engagement Scale (JES; Rich et al., 2010), cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement were examined. The authors concluded "psychological climate and the individual-level affective outcomes were associated, as well as that employee engagement moderated these relations" (p. 54). Ultimately, the elements of workplace climates and engagement were found to be positively associated. This linkage found

leaders, managers, and practitioners improved the workplace climate through an increase in employee engagement. Another important implication suggested by the results was that, "...as a specific leverage point, HR professionals could facilitate refinement of managerial skills toward improving supervisee engagement in teams, cross-functional work groups, and the organizational overall" (p. 55).

The relationship between the three psychological conditions that Kahn's theory (1990) identifies – meaningfulness, psychological safety, and readiness to engage – and employee engagement is supported empirically. For example, Rich, Lepine, and Crawford (2010) examined firefighters' investment in their roles and found there was a relation between the mediators of job involvement, job satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation. Specifically, results of the study showed engagement facilitated connections among value congruence (Kahn's meaningfulness), perceived organizational support (Kahn's psychological safety), and core self-evaluations of individuals in the workplace (Kahn's individual readiness to engage).

## **Conclusion and Implications for the Study Based on the Literature**

**Conclusion Summary.** In this Chapter, I explored and examined several key areas, including a summary of research related to employee engagement, including the definition of employee engagement, the effects of employee engagement on organizations, the perceived benefits of higher levels of employee engagement, and the key elements of employee engagement in the workplace. Additionally, I explained the theoretical perspective, Kahn's theory of employee engagement, which framed the study's design.



**Implications.** The nuanced history and various definitions of employee engagement highlight the common threads and similarities among the research. However, the review of literature also underwrites the contextualized differences of employee engagement among organizations and settings. The literature provides the foundation to adopt Kahn's (1990) definition of engagement the connection of individuals to their work as well as their expression of themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in the workplace and during work performance tasks. With a foundational and working definition, the study assessed the levels of employee engagement within the context of the Student Services Division at Merced College.

The review of literature reveals the effects and perceived benefits of higher levels of employee engagement within organizations. Although there are few studies specifically related to the context of higher education, the literature suggests there are effects and benefits across organizational lines and contextual differences. Given the multiple benefits of higher levels of employee engagement in organizations, this study provides a new context, higher education and more specifically student services employees in a community college setting, in which to examine the effects of increasing levels of employee engagement.

Higher education, more than ever, must compete in the global market (Levin, 2005). The review of literature reveals that highly engaged workforces increase organizations' competitive edge in the market (Mehta & Mehta, 2013). Further, the literature review provides the framework to build highly engaged workforces to improve employee morale, customer service satisfaction, increase retention, reduce absenteeism, and increase productivity and creativity (Wagner & Harter, 2006). It is reasonable to

expect that highly engaged student services professionals will also aid in better serving students in higher education as well as aiding Merced College to maintain a competitive edge among the college market.

The concepts and research explained in Chapter 2 also help to inform the intervention that was implemented and studied as part of this study. The study's intervention aimed to improve employee engagement through professional development interventions facilitated and conducted by management (McBain, 2007). Kahn's (1990) theory of employee engagement drove the intervention of this study and served as a framework for the study's research design. The theory of employee engagement provided the structure for the intended outcome of the study to assess and improve psychological conditions in the workplace. The study aimed to connect the assessment data collected on the levels of employee engagement from the employee engagement pre-test survey and close the gaps by developing interventions to improve certain conditions to better engage employees in task behaviors in the workplace (Kahn, 1990). The survey instrument used, consistent with the constructs of the theory of employee engagement and Gallup's constructs of employee engagement, assessed all levels of employee engagement. Both frameworks served as the basis for designing the performance management modules and interventions to improve the lowest levels of employee engagement within the Merced College Student Services Division.

Further, Kahn's theory provided the framework to develop and implement intervention activities and professional development programs to improve levels of employee engagement. Kahn's work provided the basis for improving employee engagement through three psychological conditions: meaningfulness, safety, and

availability. By cross-walking the lowest elements of employee engagement, based on Gallup's constructs and Kahn's theory of engagement, I developed an intervention with the goal of improving levels of employee engagement through professional development and intentional intervention methods by the management within the division. Both the qualitative and quantitative data collected provided the empirical evidence and support to develop, implement, and assess the efficacy of these interventions.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodology guiding the project. It begins with a description of the study setting and participants. Using the action research study model, I then provide an explanation of the research design as well as my positionality as the researcher of the study. This section also provides a summary of the previous cycles of this research study used to inform this research design. The interventions, including a rationale for the interventions, are explained and summarized. I then provide a description of the qualitative and quantitative instruments and data collection procedures and the plan for data analysis to answer the identified research questions. Finally, I conclude Chapter 3 with the project timeline from the overall study.

#### **Setting**

The action research study took place in the Merced College Student Services Division. Founded in 1962, the Merced Community College District (MCCD) is a mid-size two-year college within the California Community College System enrolling more than 14,000 students on an annual basis. The College is recognized as a Hispanic serving institution with an approximately 57% Hispanic/Latino population. Additionally, first-generation college students comprise more than 50% of the total student population. The College offers a broad array of transfer and career and technical education programs, as well as workforce and business development programs. Students can fulfill their lower division general education and major requirements for a university baccalaureate degree, obtain an associate of arts or associate of science degree, or complete a career and technical education certificate program. The transfer program includes coursework that

articulates with the California State University and University of California systems as well as private four-year colleges and universities.

The Student Services Division employs approximately 132 employees, including faculty, classified professional staff, and administrators/managers, in 15 departments and programs, including financial aid, admissions and records, student equity, disabled student services, special programs and services, international student services, outreach and recruitment, career and transfer services, academic support and tutorial services, athletic programs, student government, counseling, and student health services.

Recall from chapter 1 that I conducted a “listening tour” when I first started as Vice President of Student Services (VPSS) to gain perspective of the culture and organizational environment of the division. Since this initial “listening tour” I have led professional development and engagement initiatives, including the development of an engagement team, to informally address perceived gaps in employee engagement among the workforce. Although I am now in the role of president of the college, the Student Services Division is under my leadership and the VPSS is a direct report; thus, I have a direct role in continuing this research and a vested interest in improving both employee engagement and customer services with the Student Services Division. This action research dissertation more formally identified and attempted to address gaps in employee engagement through the use of a valid assessment tool for student services employees.

### **Participants**

The participants for the qualitative one-on-one interviews were three managers, two classified professionals, and two faculty. The sampling for this study was purposive. For the one-on-one interviews, I chose both of the participants based on their tenure

within the organization and employee classification. I specifically wanted to assess the perspectives, knowledge, and ideas from the lens of classified professionals (staff), faculty, and administrators.

The first participant, Gary (a pseudonym), is a full-time tenured faculty member and has been with the organization for 20 years. He is an academic and transfer counselor and involved in shared governance committees and task forces throughout the College. Until recently, he has served on the Student Services Employee Engagement Team for the past three years. He has a master's degree in counseling. He is not a direct report to me as the president of the college.

The second participant, Maria (a pseudonym), is a fourth year, full-time tenured-track probationary faculty member. She is an academic counselor, first-generation college graduate, and former student at Merced College. She has been involved with numerous engagement activities and professional development programs. She has a master's degree in counseling. She is not a direct report to me as the president of the college.

The third participant, Shelly (also a pseudonym), is a long-time classified professional and has been with the organizations for more than eighteen years. She is a staff member in the Office of Student Equity and assists with coordinating student equity programs and services for special populations on campus. Shelly has an associate's degree in business. She has also served as a member of the Student Services Engagement Team for the past three years. Although a member of the management team, she is not a direct report to me as the president of the college.

Frank (also a pseudonym), the fourth participant, is a classified professional and has been at Merced College for twenty-five years. Although he has held other classified professional positions within the Student Services Division, he is currently an outreach and student support specialist technician. He has an associate's degree from Merced College. He is not a direct report to me as the president of the college.

The fifth participant, Carmen (also a pseudonym), is a manager within the Student Services Division and has been with the College since 2002. She was a classified professional for five years before moving into her current management role in 2007. She has a bachelor's degree and has been highly involved in employee engagement initiatives within the Student Services Division. Although a member of the management team, she is not a direct report to me as the president of the college.

The sixth participant, Angela (also a pseudonym), is an administrator within the Student Services Division. She has been in this role and with the College for approximately one year. Prior to coming to Merced College, she was a lower-level manager in student support services at a neighboring community college and a counselor in special programs and services. Angela has a doctorate degree in psychology and is a licensed clinical social worker and certified counselor. She is a direct report to the vice president of student services and not to me as the president of the college.

Finally, the seventh participant, Brenda (also a pseudonym), is an administrator within the Student Services Division. She has been with the College and an administrator for approximately four years. Her background includes management at another community college and a counselor in special programs and services. She, too, is a direct

report to the vice president of student services and not to me as the president of the college.

For the quantitative data collection, the participants of this action research study included the approximately 132 employees in the Student Services Division at Merced College during the spring, summer, and early-fall of 2018. Of the participants, 24% were male and 74% were female with 2% identifying as other. The participants for this cycle of research were full-time and part-time employees. There were 10 managers, 53 faculty, and 66 classified professionals (staff). Participants' years of experience ranged from a couple of months to 30-plus years of service as an employee within the Student Services Division. Of the 10 managers, three were educational administrators and seven were director-level managers.

All of the managers have educational levels of a bachelor's degree or higher. The managers oversee student support services and programs. With the exception of the 10 direct reports to the VPSS, the managers oversee the remaining approximately 122 employees within the Student Services Division. All faculty had a minimum of a master's degree in counseling and experiences range from one year to more than twenty-five years. The classified professionals' educational levels involved in this study ranged from no formal education to bachelor degrees. The classified professionals' experiences ranged from one month to more than thirty years. See Table 3 for complete demographics of the Student Services employees.



Table 3

*Survey Participate Demographics*

	All Student Services Employees (n=132)		Pre-Test Study Participants (n=99)		Post-Test Study Participants (n=110)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	32	24.0	24	24.0	30	27.0
Female	97	74.0	66	67.0	68	62.0
Other	3	2.0	1	1.0	1	1.0
No Response	0	0.0	8	8.0	11	10.0
Race/Ethnicity						
Hispanic/Latino	44	33.0	39	39.0	35	32.0
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	1.0	1	1.0	0	0.0
Asian	10	8.0	5	5.0	10	9.0
Black/African American	9	7.0	4	4.0	6	5.5
Nat. Hawaiian/Other Pac Islander	1	1.0	1	1.0	0	0.0
White	29	22.0	35	35.0	39	35.0
Other	35	27.0	4	4.0	6	5.5
Unknown/No response	3	2.0	10	10.0	14	13.0
Degree Level						
High School or GED	18	14.0	4	4.0	6	6.0
Associate Degree	24	18.0	21	21.0	29	26.0
Bachelor Degree	26	20.0	19	19.0	21	19.0
Master Degree	53	40.0	31	31.0	30	27.0
Doctorate Degree	8	6.0	9	9.0	9	8.0
Other	3	2.0	4	4.0	5	5.0
No response	0	0.0	11	11.0	10	9.0
Employee Classification						
Classified Professional (Staff)	66	50.0	49	49.0	58	53.0
Faculty	53	40.0	34	34.0	32	29.0
Management	10	8.0	8	8.0	10	9.0
Other	3	2.0	8	8.0	10	9.0
Employment Status						
Part-time	35	27.0	16	16.0	11	10.0
Full-time	97	73.0	74	75.0	87	79.0
Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.0
No response	0	0.0	9	9.0	11	10.0

I distributed both the pre- and post-survey to all 132 employees within the Student Services Division; 99/132 (75%) responded and completed the pre-survey and 110/132 (83%) responded and completed the post-survey.

The pre-survey participants of this action research study included 99 employees in the Student Services Division at Merced College. Of the pre-survey participants (n=99), 24% were male and 67% were female with 1% identifying as “other” and 8% with no response. The pre-survey participants were full-time (74/99; 75%) and part-time (16/99; 16%) employees with nine (9/99; 9%) not responding to their employee classification. Of the pre-survey participants, there were 8/99 (8%) managers, 34/99 (34%) faculty, 49/99 (49%) classified professionals (staff), and 8/99 (8%) identified as other (contract). The pre-survey respondents were 39/99 (39%) Hispanic/Latino, 1/99 (1%) American Indian/Alaska Native, 5/99 (5%) Asian, 4/99 (4%) Black/African American, 1/99 (1%) Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 35/99 (35%) White, 4/99 (4%) Other, and 10/99 (10%) Unknown/No Response.

The post-survey participants of this action research study included 110 employees in the Student Services Division at Merced College. Of the post-survey participants (n=110), 27% were male and 62% were female with 1% identifying as “other” and 10% no response. The post-survey participants were full-time (87/110; 79%) and part-time (11/110; 10%) employees with one “other” (1/110; 1%) and eleven (11/110; 10%) not responding to their employee status. Of the post-survey participants, there were 10/110 (9%) managers, 32/110 (29%) faculty, 58/110 (53%) classified professionals (staff), and 10/110 (9%) identified as “other” (contract). The post-survey respondents were 35/110 (32%) Hispanic/Latino, 0/110 (0%) American Indian/Alaska Native, 10/110 (9%) Asian,

6/110 (5.5%) Black/African American, 0/110 (0%) Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 39/110 (35%) White, 6/110 (5.5%) Other, and 14/110 (13%) Unknown/No Response.

### **Research Design**

This was an action research study. Mills (2011) defined action research as “any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn” (as cited by Mertler, 2014, p.4). Further, action research is cyclical with a process of identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and developing a plan of action. “Action research offers a process by which current practice can be changed toward better practice” (p.13). As such, my research involved several cycles focused on employee engagement among student services professionals leading up to this dissertation action research study to refine the process and hone in on a specific area of focus.

Further, this study was conducted as a mixed method research design, specifically an explanatory mixed-methods design. As noted by Creswall (2005) “in an explanatory mixed-methods design, the educator-researcher first collects quantitative data and then gathers additional qualitative data in order to help support, explain, or elaborate on the quantitative results” (as cited in Mertler, 2014, p.104). The mixed methods approach allowed for triangulation of the data collected through the survey tool with the manager interviews. Quantitative data included participant responses from both pre-test (completed in fall 2017) and post-test Likert-style survey items. Qualitative data

included participant feedback and responses to questions based on the results of the pre-test to inform the development of the action research study intervention methods.

Finally, the qualitative research was conducted through a constructivist approach. Constructivism requires discovery on the part of the researcher to find meaning in a study through the perspectives of their participants (Crotty, 1998). Through constructivism, individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences to develop their worldview. The participants' meanings are varied and requires the researcher to narrow them from complex views to discrete categories or themes. As such, the researcher relies primarily on the participants' views to construct meaning.

Constructivism does not prescribe to neither an objective or subjective viewpoint when seeking 'truth.' This study was a constructivist study as it requires social interaction to determine the meaningful reality within the workplace at Merced College. As such, I sought to understand the individual minds and emotions of employees as they relate to the elements of employee engagement. As a researcher, I was removed from the meaning and my participants assisted in the data analysis and representation to make meaning of the process.

### **Role of the Researcher**

For the purposes of this action research dissertation study, I considered myself as an "insider" action researcher. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), the positionality of a researcher as an "insider" is when the researcher focuses on their own practice or practice setting. I have spent the better part of the past 12 years in higher education administration. I have served as a director, dean, vice president, and now president. During this time, I have always focused on improving workplace

environments to get the best of employees. I have found over the years that highly engaged workforces are more productive, loyal, committed to quality work, and overall, make the workplace a generally fun and exciting place to work.

Although now the President of the Merced Community College District (MCCD), I conducted a “listening tour” when I first started as Vice President of Student Services (VPSS), nearly four years ago, to gain perspective of the culture and organizational environment of the division. Since this initial “listening tour” I have led professional development and engagement initiatives, including the development of an engagement team, to informally address perceived gaps in employee engagement among the workforce.

My role as the President requires direct leadership and oversight of the VPSS, which is the administrator overseeing the Student Services Division. Given my current role and relatively recent tenure as the VPSS, my positionality presented possible limitations with the employees in the Student Services Division to allow for candid and honest feedback to collect the data necessary to build quality intervention programs to improve employee engagement. Therefore, I recognized the need to have another interviewer familiar with employee engagement, other than me, to conduct the interviews to avoid positionality bias and influence in the data collection phase. Finally, a benefit to my positionality is through this study and future iterations, I am able to use the work completed within the Student Services Division to implement systemic change and develop a model that can be used throughout the District.

## **Previous Cycles of Research Completed**

**Managers' Perceptions of Engagement.** The initial cycle of research informing the present study was completed in spring 2017. The purpose of the initial cycle was to explore managers' perceptions of their own engagement as well as their beliefs about policies, practices, and other activities that optimize employee engagement. This iteration of the study was an explanatory mixed-methods design, similar to this proposed action research dissertation, but was focused on the nine Student Services managers rather than all employees. The mixed methods approach allowed for triangulation of the data collected through a primarily quantitative survey tool with manager interviews. The quantitative research design included a one-group pretest-posttest design to assess improvement due to the interventions and best practices implemented related to managers' perceptions of engagement (Mertler, 2014). The manager pre-test provided the data to identify the lowest element of managers' engagement among four constructs (See Appendix A, Cycle 1 Manager Survey Instrument). The interviews provided the opportunity for me as the researcher to better assess the effectiveness of the interventions.

The web-based manager engagement survey platform was administered electronically, via email, to nine managers within the Student Services Division. The direct electronic email approach proved effective in getting a 100% response rate. The 16-item instrument was administered on a 6-point Likert scale where "6" is "strongly agree" and "1" is "strongly disagree." The constructs of the survey were based on four of Gallup's twelve elements of employee engagement. There were four items per construct. The four constructs, as identified in *12 Elements of Great Managing* by Wagner and Harter (2006), measured for this study included the following: a) Expectations at work

are clear, b) Recognition of good work, c) Connection to the mission or purpose, and d) Opportunity to learn and grow. Overall, the research design with four constructs provided enough quantitative data from the pre-survey results to assess which elements were the highest and lowest.

After the initial survey, the engagement element, recognition of good work, was identified as the lowest element of managers' engagement and became the focus on the initial intervention implemented in late Spring 2017. The interventions included a series of praise and recognition of good work of managers within the Student Services Division during a three-week period. During the three-week period, managers received both verbal and written praise and recognition from me (the President of the College), the vice president, and from their peers. The interventions, which were simple and brief, seemed to be effective in addressing the identified lower element of managers' engagement by the pre-survey instrument. Finally, the post-survey was helpful in validating the effectiveness of the intervention methods (See Appendix A).

As a part of the research design of this earlier cycle of research, I also conducted one-on-one interviews with two managers using a semi-structured interview guide to gather the preliminary data for the overall problem of practice and to inform future iterations of the study (See Appendix B, Cycle 1 Manager Interview Instrument). Although the original tool included seven open-ended items, the final interview instrument only included five open-ended items. I found the original questions to be too broad and did not help me triangulate the data from the surveys or fully measure the effectiveness of the interventions to inform future cycles of the study. Overall, the qualitative method seemed to lack the depth needed to fully triangulate the data.

Learning from this cycle of research, this action research study included more robust questions as well as additional survey participants and interview participants.

Overall, the data collection and analysis from these initial cycles focused on managers' engagement were helpful in determining how to conduct this action research study. The limitations of the data collection and analysis included the low sample size of the participants and my positionality for the qualitative portion of the study. However, this was a known limitation going into this cycle of the study and easily addressed as a part of this larger action research study. The use of Survey Monkey as a means to collect and analyze the data was useful and was used in this study as well, but with increased sample sizes. SPSS was also used to conduct more comprehensive analyses of the data collected.

**Employees' Perceptions of Engagement.** The next cycle of data collection expanded to include all Student Services employees, to identify dimensions of engagement that most require improvement across the entire division. The employee pre-intervention survey, described in more detail below in the "Instruments and Data Collection Procedures" section of this chapter, was sent to all Student Services Division employees on October 31, 2017 and remained open for 30 days. The response rate for the survey was 83% (n=99 employees), and the results are summarized in Table 4 below.



Table 4

*Pre-Intervention Survey Descriptive Statistics*

Construct	N Valid	N Missing	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
Expectations at work	99	0	5.2441	5.3333	6.00	.83582
Recognition of good work	99	0	4.3586	4.6667	5.00	1.17932
Connection to the mission	98	1	5.4966	5.6667	6.00	.59445
Learn and grow	96	3	4.4149	4.6667	5.00	1.26097
Resources and materials	96	3	4.7917	5.0000	5.00	1.10528
Doing what you do best	96	3	5.0104	5.0000	6.00	.89633
Someone cares about you	96	3	4.8507	5.0000	5.00	.84031
Someone encourages development	96	3	4.8403	5.0000	5.00	.95388
Opinion seems to count	95	4	4.8351	5.0000	5.00	.95634
Commitment to quality work	96	3	5.4444	5.6667	6.00	.65724
Relationships with colleagues	95	4	5.1930	5.3333	6.00	.84296
Goals and progress	95	4	5.1175	5.0000	6.00	.71081

As highlighted, the three lowest constructs are recognition of good work with a mean score of 4.36, learn and grow with a mean score of 4.42, and resources and materials with a mean score of 4.79. The three lowest constructs also had the highest standard deviation scores among the twelve constructs included in the survey, indicating a higher variance in responses among the three lowest constructs.

**Innovations**

For the innovation, I used an existing suite of professional development training programs for managers to become “employee engagement champions” and each department/program manager created an action plan to address the Student Services

Division's three lowest elements of employee engagement. The overall innovation and interventions were based on Merced College Student Services Division employees' responses to the pre-survey, which captured twelve constructs of employee engagement, described in more detail in the Instrument section below (See Appendix C, Employee Engagement Survey Instrument). More specifically, the interventions were intended to address the three lowest constructs identified by the pre-intervention survey analysis: 1) Recognition and praise of good work, 2) Opportunity to learn and grow, and 3) Resources and materials to do job (See Table 4). In addition, the interventions were developed by the managers of each department as part of their customized action plans to address the three lowest elements using best practice approaches and initiatives learned as a part of Gallup's "Creating an Engaging Workplace Course for Engagement Champions" and ideas and concepts derived from the one-on-one interviews from this study.

**Professional Development.** Each manager participated in two employee engagement workshops as part of the intervention. The goal of the managers' participation in these workshops was to ensure they were knowledgeable of the key concepts, purposes, and benefits of employee engagement and for them to become "employee engagement champions" prepared with an action plan to improve the lowest levels of employee engagement within the Division. The first workshop was an introductory workshop defining employee engagement, introducing Gallup's twelve constructs of employee engagement, and describing what employee engagement looks like in the workplace. The managers learned the difference between engaged, disengaged, and actively disengaged employees and how they impact the workplace. The managers also learned Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement and the three psychological

conditions associated with the theory. Finally, they learned key ways to engage employees as well as strategies to implement to help keep employees engaged as well as how to re-engage disengaged employees within their department.

The second workshop for the student services managers was conducted as a “train-the-trainer” based on Gallup Organization’s *Creating an Engagement Workplace Course for Engagement Champion* (2017, January 20) program. The goal of this workshop was to prepare each of the managers to become employee engagement experts and leaders. Managers learned how to promote and advocate for employee engagement within their respective departments, develop customized action plans to address employee engagement among their teams (See Appendix D, Action Plan Template), and proven strategies to help increase levels of employee engagement among their team members.

Both of the professional development workshops were conducted by Jonae Pistoiresi, Professor of Business and Management at Merced College for 28 years. Professor Pistoiresi has been researching, studying, and teaching employee engagement for the past six years. Her research has included working with companies, such as Gallup and Disney, to create professional development programs as a part of the Merced College Emerging Leaders Institute. Specifically, Professor Pistoiresi is the author of the introductory course and workshop on employee engagement patterned after the Gallup Organization’s extensive research and twelve elements. Additionally, she attended the *Creating an Engagement Workplace Course for Engagement Champions* train-the-trainer program in April 2018 presented by the Gallup Organization. After completing this

program, she presented the second professional development workshop to the student services managers as mentioned above.

**Action Plans.** Based on the outcomes of the pre-intervention survey, the three lowest constructs of employee engagement within the Student Services Division are: 1) Recognition and praise of good work, 2) Opportunity to learn and grow, and 3) Resources and materials to do job (See Table 4). As part of the second workshop, managers within the Student Services Division were required to develop customized action plans for their respective departments for each of the three constructs (See Appendix E, Sample Manager Customized Action Plan). The action plans included the following elements: name of construct, strategies for improvement, action steps, deadline, resources, and outcomes and observations. The outcomes and observations section required the managers to identify which of Kahn's (1990) psychological conditions were met as part of the intervention/strategy for each of the three constructs. The action plans allowed for the managers to develop plans based on the specific needs and personalities of their employees. The strategies were developed based on the content highlighted within the two workshops, which included proven best practices and initiatives provided by the Gallup Organization, Professor Pistorresi's research and experiences in the field, and the themes and ideas from the one-on-one interviews from this study.

**Rationale for Innovation Approaches.** The rationale for this innovation method is well-substantiated in both practice and the research literature. Research literature supports the use of employee engagement surveys, such as the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA) or often referred to as the Q<sup>12</sup> (Werner et al., 2011). The Gallup Organization has done extensive research on employee engagement. As a part of a worldwide study of

employee performance and motivation, Gallup identified the 12 elements of work life as factors that affected performance in the workplace (Wagner & Harter, 2006).

Professional development generates meaningfulness, one of the psychological conditions for employee engagement (Kahn, 1990), by providing employees the opportunity to develop knowledge, skills, and abilities (McManus & Mosca, 2015). Not only did the professional development workshops provide the managers the opportunity to grow and learn themselves, but they also allowed them to develop meaningful action plans to meet the unique needs of the employees within their department.

Gruman and Saks (2011) referred to Kahn's (1990) work on employee engagement as a phenomenon in which employees respond to changes in the workplace to adjust their selves-in-role. They further suggested that "levels of employee engagement are assumed to change in response to the degree to which the various elements in the performance management process are designed to promote its occurrence" (p.126). Therefore, by responding to lower levels of employee engagement in the workplace with specific interventions, employees will adjust their selves and their level of engagement.

Finally, leadership is considered a key driver to improve employee engagement in the workplace (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Kahn's (1990) research identified supportive, resilient, and clarifying management as a component of increasing psychological safety in the workplace; thus, a primary element of workplace engagement. Supportive management allows individuals to try new things and to fail without the fear of negative consequences (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Finally, Seijts and Crim (2006) asserted that one of the elements of engaging employees the most is when "good leaders establish

processes and procedures that help people master important tasks and facilitate goal achievement” (p.4).

Through the assessment of the levels of employee engagement among the student services practitioners, a formal intervention sought to improve employee engagement through professional development programs for managers and formal workplace engagement initiatives through action plans for each department. The interventions’ goal was to increase levels of employee engagement with the intent to better serve students and provide higher quality customer service within the Student Services Division at Merced College.

### **Instruments and Data Collection Procedures**

**Quantitative Data Collection.** Quantitative data was collected using a pre-test post-test survey instrument (See Appendix C) prior to the implementation of the intervention and again after the conclusion of the intervention, during an approximate 4-month period. The web-based employee engagement survey was administered electronically, via email, to all 132 employees in October 2017, and the response rate was 75% (99/132). After the intervention, the survey was administered again in October 2018, through the same electronic modality, to all 132 employees with a response rate was 83% (110/132). The survey instrument was not linked to individuals, and responses were reported entirely in the aggregate.

The main constructs of the survey were based on Gallup’s twelve elements of employee engagement (Wagner & Harter, 2006). The survey instrument differed slightly from Gallup’s original in that each of the constructs have been summarized by me into more concise terms to align with the items developed specifically for Merced College

employees. The instrument also differed somewhat from the manager engagement survey that was used in the initial cycles of this project, in that this survey instrument was designed based on all twelve constructs (versus only four) and for all employee classifications (versus only management) within the Student Services Division.

Building off of the *12 Elements of Great Managing* identified by Wagner and Harter (2006), the constructs for the employee engagement instrument consisted of the following:

- (a) Expectations at work
- (b) Recognition of good work
- (c) Connection to the mission or purpose
- (d) Opportunity to learn and grow
- (e) Resource and materials to do job
- (f) Opportunity to do what you do best at work
- (g) Supervisor, or someone at work, cares about you as a person
- (h) Someone at work encourages development
- (i) Opinions seem to count
- (j) Commitment to quality work
- (k) Working relationships with colleagues
- (l) Goals and progress in the workplace

I created three items per construct, for a total of 36 items. The complete set of survey items is provided in Appendix C. All items were administered on a 6-point Likert scale where “6” is “strongly agree” and “1” is “strongly disagree.” To illustrate how the constructs were operationalized, I’ve provided two sample survey items. One item used

to assess levels of engagement with having the expectations at work is, “I know what is expected of me at work...”. Another item used to assess levels of satisfaction with recognition of good work is, “My supervisor finds ways to recognize me for doing quality work...”.

**Qualitative Data Collection.** Based on the pre-intervention survey analysis, the qualitative portion of the study sought to gain perspective from student services employees in order to refine the interventions described in the section above to address the three lower elements of engagement within the Student Services Division. The findings of the qualitative portion of the study were shared with the managers to assist in their development of the action plans for their respective departments.

One qualitative data collection method was used for this study: Employee Engagement Interview Instrument (See Appendix F). The data collection included one-on-one interviews with seven employees (managers, faculty, and classified professionals) in the Student Services Division. The one-on-one interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to refine the design of the innovation (Mertler, 2014). The interview instrument included seven open-ended items related to employee engagement (Appendix F).

The employees were asked to respond to questions regarding the purpose of employee engagement, their own perceived levels of engagement in the workplace, perceptions of the three lowest constructs, how they personally relate to the lowest elements, and their opinions on specific interventions and/or practices to address the lowest constructs. To illustrate the nature of the constructs, one item that was used to assess the employees’ own perceived levels of engagement as an employee was “How



would you characterize your personal level of engagement as an employee at Merced College?, and why do you describe yourself in that way?” Each interview was a one-time occurrence. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each and were audio recorded. Finally, as previously discussed, an expert other than myself, Professor Jonae Pistoressi, conducted the interviews to avoid positionality bias as part of the interview process.

### **Data Analysis**

As a reminder, this study was designed to investigate two research questions for the problem of practice. To accomplish this both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed. The research questions were:

- RQ 1:     What factors and best practices will help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College?
- RQ 2:     How and to what extent does manager interventions improve employee engagement among student services professionals?
  - Do professional development programs adequately equip managers to become employee engagement champions?
  - Do customized employee engagement action plans, developed by managers within the Student Services Division, lead to improving targeted constructs of employee engagement?

The first research question focused on the development of programs, services, and/or best practices to improve employee engagement. To conduct a comprehensive analysis of this question, one-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted by an interviewer, other than me, and expert in employee engagement, Jonae Pistoressi,

Professor of Business, Merced College. Once the interviews were transcribed, I then used inductive analysis. Inductive analysis allowed me to analyze the qualitative data collected, which included organizing, describing, and interpreting large amounts of data to reduce the overall volume of information (Mertler, 2014). The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the selected participants of the study. Further, I created tables with initial codes and themes of the data. Finally, I analyzed and interpreted the data to identify specific conclusions to answer my research questions.

I sought to understand the individual minds and emotions of employees interviewed through thematic analysis. I began the data analysis with open coding processes by reading through my interview transcript multiple times and then chunking the content into meaning units and giving each meaning unit a label (combined and unified codes throughout the first few phases of the process). Initially, I identified 439 open codes, which will be explained in more detail below. I then clustered open codes towards themes and generated a label that served as the theme line-by-line throughout the analysis of the interview transcript. This second round of analysis resulted in 23 unique labels. Finally, I discovered higher level themes and included them throughout the document in the right-hand column and then clustered them again with sub-categories and developed and assigned codes to each of the sub-categories. As explained further in the Results, my final analysis generated three themes related to the role of managers in employee improvement efforts. These results are later presented in narrative form.

The second question focused on measuring improvement interventions related to the elements of employee engagement to improve supports and services provided by employees of the division to students. To answer this question, I again conducted

quantitative analyses from the data provided through the post-intervention employee engagement survey tool. Using Microsoft Excel and SPSS, the raw data from the post-survey was analyzed to determine the measures of central tendency, including the mean score of each employee engagement element to identify the highest and lowest levels of engagement for the Student Services Division. At this stage in the process, I conducted an internal reliability analysis on the constructs and items through the use of the IBM SPSS© version 23 software to conduct the Cronbach Alpha coefficient analysis. I measured reliability using Cronbach's alpha coefficient on each construct and on the survey as a whole. "Internal consistency measures (such as Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient) determine how well items contained in the questionnaire measure the "same thing" (Diem, 2004, p.5). Finally, to understand whether the means for pre- and post-surveys significantly differed for each construct and evaluate whether employees' levels of employee engagement increased due to the targeted interventions were implemented by managers, I conducted a series of independent-samples *t* test. The results of this are presented in Chapter 4 in both narrative form and the use of tables.

### **Project Timeline**

Data collection began in the fall 2017 and concluded in fall 2018. As previously mentioned, the pre-intervention survey was developed and conducted in the fall 2017 to allow for time to develop and implement interventions in the late-spring 2018. Once the survey data was analyzed, the three lowest elements (i.e., constructs) of employee engagement were identified and the interviews began in early-spring 2018 and concluded within a two-week period. The data was then analyzed to assess the intervention. Based on the qualitative data analysis, the interventions were developed in late-spring 2018.

The managers and supervisors were provided the professional development and training program in May 2018 and the interventions took place in late-spring 2018, summer 2018, and early-fall 2018. The post-intervention survey was conducted in October 2018 and opened for a 30-day period. Table 5 illustrates the timeline of the study.

Table 5

*Timeline and Steps of the Study*

Timeframe	Action Steps	Procedures
October 2017 through November 2017	Conducted pre-intervention survey using the Student Services Employee Engagement Survey (See Appendix C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed electronic survey through online survey tool (i.e., SurveyMonkey)</li> <li>• Administered pre-test survey via email link</li> </ul>
January 2018	Analyzed pre-intervention survey results and identified the three lowest elements of employee engagement to develop interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted quantitative analysis</li> <li>• Identified the three lowest elements employee engagement for the interventions</li> </ul>
Late-March 2018	Conducted qualitative interviews based on the pre-intervention survey analysis results using the Student Services Employee Engagement Interview Instrument (See Appendix F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted qualitative interviews</li> <li>• Conducted qualitative analysis</li> <li>• Identified themes for the development of intervention action planning</li> </ul>
April 2018	Prepared for the train-the-trainer portion of the intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sent Professor Jonae Pistoresi to <i>Creating an Engagement Workplace Course for Engagement Champions</i> train-the-trainer program presented by the Gallup Organization</li> </ul>
Early-May 2018	Conducted <i>Introduction to Employee Engagement Workshop</i> for Student Services Division managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organized workshop and scheduled presenter</li> <li>• Hosted <i>Introduction to Employee Engagement Workshop</i></li> </ul>
May 2018	Conducted <i>Creating an Engagement Workplace Course for Engagement Champions</i> for Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organized workshop and scheduled presenter</li> </ul>

	Services Division managers and created customized action plans (See Appendices D and E) for each department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hosted <i>Creating an Engagement Workplace Course for Engagement Champions</i></li> <li>• Shared qualitative data to help develop action plans</li> <li>• Facilitated the development of action plans for each manager and their respective departments</li> </ul>
Late-Spring 2018, Summer 2018, and Early-Fall 2018	Implemented innovation with structured intervention action plan (Sample provided in Appendix E)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers implemented innovations, based on their customized action plans, at the department-level</li> </ul>
October 2018 through November 2018	Conducted post-intervention survey using the Student Services Employee Engagement Survey (See Appendix C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed electronic survey through online survey tool (i.e., SurveyMonkey)</li> <li>• Administered post-intervention survey via email link</li> </ul>
December 2018	Analyzed post-intervention survey results and assessed impact of the innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted quantitative analysis</li> </ul>
December 2018 through early-January 2019	Finalized Chapters 4 and 5 of action research dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarized findings for Chapter 4</li> <li>• Summarized conclusions of the student for Chapter 5</li> </ul>

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## Chapter 4

### DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data analyses and results from this action research study are presented in this chapter. As you will recall from Chapter 3, this action research dissertation sought to more formally identify and attempt to address gaps in employee engagement through the use of a valid assessment tool for student services employees. Mixed methods of inquiry were used to answer the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What factors and best practices will help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College?
- RQ 2: How and to what extent does manager interventions improve employee engagement among student services professionals?
- Do professional development programs adequately equip managers to become employee engagement champions?
  - Do customized employee engagement action plans, developed by managers within the Student Services Division, lead to improving targeted constructs of employee engagement?

The mixed methods data sources included employee interviews and a pre-test post-test employee survey. Organized by the research questions, I have provided an analysis of the results from the qualitative interview questions and the pre-test post-test employee surveys. The first section includes results from the qualitative data and assertions based on the themes related to the factors and best practices to help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College. The

second section includes the results from the quantitative data, including an analyses from the pre-test post-test surveys.

### **Results and Analysis of Research Question 1**

What factors and best practices will help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College? As discussed in Chapter 3, I conducted one-on-one qualitative interviews and used inductive analysis to answer this research question. I created tables with initial codes and themes of the data analyzed and interpreted the data to identify specific conclusions to answer my research questions. Initially, I identified approximately 439 open codes, which will be explained in more detail below. I then clustered open codes towards themes and generated a label that served as the theme line-by-line throughout the analysis of the interview transcript. This second round of analysis resulted in 23 unique labels. Finally, I discovered higher level themes and included them throughout the document in the right-hand column and then clustered them again with sub-categories and developed and assigned codes to each of the sub-categories. As explained further in the Results, my final analysis generated three themes related to the role of managers in employee improvement efforts.

**Findings and Interpretations from the Qualitative Interviews.** Three major themes emerged related to the role of managers in improving Merced College Student Services employee engagement: 1) Ensure managers are familiar with the goals and purposes of employee engagement, 2) Establish managers as drivers or influencers of employee engagement in the workplace, and 3) Develop simple interventions as influencers to improve employee engagement in the workplace. These three major themes were coded as “familiarity,” “driver,” and “intervention.”

**Ensure Managers Are Familiar with the Goals and Purposes.** Each interview included questions about participants' opinion of the purpose and value of employee engagement (full questions provided in the interview protocol in Appendix F). The analyses of the qualitative interviews confirmed there was a general consensus of the purpose and value of employee engagement among all employees, but particularly the managers. Carmen, the student services manager participant, defined employee engagement in terms of being a part of a family, caring for each other, engaging in a common mission and appreciating what each person brings to the team. Angela, the student services administrator participant, also demonstrated familiarity with the overall goals and purposes of employee engagement. She asserted that employees who are engaged are "passionate about their tasks and their purpose and they understand task and purpose" and always willing to go "above and beyond" in completing their respective responsibilities. Most interviewees also asserted an understanding that higher engaged employees resulted in better service to students. Frank, classified professional participant, explained, "I believe that when you have employees engaged on their work and the service that they provide, it produces better service to the people that you're serving."

All managers provided subtle, and yet sometimes direct, assertions throughout the interviews indicating their "familiarity" with the basic definitions and purposes of employee engagement. Brenda, used personal examples and, at one point, even referred to herself as highly engaged—terms used by Kahn and scholars. She indicated her supervisor often helps influence her level of engagement through words of affirmation and praise: "I want to work hard for this institution because...I'm being supported, I feel



valued and so I'm going to be a higher performer.” This not only corroborated the theme related to familiarity, but also aligned with Kahn’s (1990) assertion that employees need to feel a sense of meaningfulness in the workplace. All managers indicated technical knowledge of employee engagement with specific workplace examples of engagement, strategies for improvement, and personal best practices, such as participating in professional development opportunities, as evidence of their knowledge and understanding of the concepts and principles of employee engagement. Overall, the consensus among employees demonstrated both an emotional/psychosocial attribute as well as behavioral. They conveyed a central purpose involving the construction of personal meaning through their own organizational experiences, and they agreed the goals/purposes of employee engagement resulted in improved outcomes/experiences for students, fellow employees, and themselves. They all demonstrated a foundational knowledge of employee engagement and it was clear their levels of awareness were helpful in knowing some of the key drivers of employee engagement in the workplace.

**Establish Managers as Drivers or Influencer.** As previous mentioned, managers are considered by many scholars as a driving metric of employee engagement (Shuck and Wollard, 2008). All seven interviews within the student services division shared a common theme that they – and their fellow managers – were a primary driver and/or influencer of employee engagement in the workplace. Table 6 highlights the emerging themes of how managers were perceived, and others in their role, drive and/or influence employee engagement in the workplace.

Table 6

*Themes for Managers as Primary Drivers of Engagement*

Themes	Explanation of Themes	Representative Quote
Manager sets tone with effective communication	Managers who communicated effectively (provided clear and concise directions, explained the purpose of a task, conducted ongoing information meetings, sent regular updates, etc.) seemed to help empower employees to better perform and do their jobs, which leads to higher levels of employee engagement.	<p>Shelly, one of the classified employee participants, stated “managers should empower their employees by conversations, communications that earns their trust.”</p> <p>Carmen stated that she is constantly talking to her employees about the importance of their specific role within the team and the overall purpose of their job to ensure they are engaged in the bigger picture.</p> <p>Gary explained that effectively communicating opportunities to learn and grow professionally can really help with classified professional development as well as providing goals and objectives for employees in the workplace.</p>
Manager establishes an engagement-centered culture and positive work climate of the department	Interviewees asserted that when managers were positive, provided praise and recognized employees, communicated effectively, and established an overall engaging department for employees, then the overall levels of employee engagement are higher.	<p>Gary explained how in his long tenure at the College he has personally experienced how some leaders come in and make an immediate contribution to improving employee engagement. Conversely, he also described how some leaders did just the opposite and contributed to disengagement through their actions and leadership style.</p> <p>Brenda stated “if an employee feels that they're part of the team, their performance is going to be a lot better and they're</p>

		going to do more for you because I see that in my area just like little compliments, make them feel valued.”
Manager is the primary example of employee engagement for the department	Examples of strong leadership among the management team were given as drivers as employee engagement. When providing examples of high levels of employee engagement, interviewees overwhelmingly provided illustrations of how a direct supervisor or manager either did something to demonstrate their willingness to improve employee engagement and/or how their leadership style lead to higher levels of employee engagement within the department.	Gary shared examples of managers who set both a positive and negative example—both impacting employee engagement. “I had a direct supervisor that things weren't-- just weren't transparent and fair and it seemed like there's dirty politics and there's dirty business.” He also shared his experience with a different supervisor stating “I really think that [my manager] made a concerted effort to have different opportunities for engagement,” which made a difference in improving employee engagement.
		Shelly mentioned the manager as the primary example several times in her interview. Specifically, she stated “So it feels that their manager needs to play a part in that to make them feel engaged, whether it be watching them and see how they're serving. They really need to pay attention, and if they're not engaging themselves, they need to kind of look at it as the manager department leader needs to take down that leadership role and make them see how they're engaging.”
Manager controls and directs professional development and interventions related to	Interviewees recognized managers have to prioritize employee engagement and find the funds in their budgets to implement initiatives. It was asserted that managers who took the initiative to develop and	The “manager should observe employees, take note on how they can support their employees and how they interact towards each other and students.”

employee engagement	direct interventions related to employee engagement were more likely to have higher levels of employee engagement.	Angela, one of the administrators asserted that managers are not only responsible for providing opportunities for employees to learn and grow, but they have a responsibility of “then supporting that person in a way they would take advantage of that opportunity. Or rewarding it in some way.”
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This emphasis on the role managers/supervisors play in ensuring high levels of employee engagement resonated with me as I processed the findings of the interviews. Regardless of their specific position in the college’s overall hierarchy, each of the managers interviewed talked about how their own supervisors either helped or hindered employee engagement in the workplace. Notably, few spoke about co-workers, facilities, students, visitors to campus, or other outside influences. This corroborated with scholars in the field and served an important factor when developing innovations for the dissertations problem of practice of this research study.

**Develop Simple Interventions as Influencers.** This qualitative study gleaned much perspective on possible innovations for the intervention and action plans developed by the managers of this research dissertation problem of practice. Each of the interviews provided multiple innovation strategies related to the three lowest levels of employee engagement. Notably, most, if not all, of the suggested strategies were not large scale nor did they require an undue financial burden on the organization for implementation. Table 7 includes the strategies that interview participants identified for managers to consider in terms of improving each of the three lowest levels of employee engagement for the Student Services Division.

Table 7

*Innovation Strategies to Improve Lowest Levels of Employee Engagement*

Employee Engagement Element	Innovation Strategies Identified
Recognition of good work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Take the time to verbally to show appreciation</li> <li>2. Connect employees to different departments</li> <li>3. Recognize employee good work monthly</li> <li>4. Write notes of appreciation</li> <li>5. Ask students to recognize the employees</li> <li>6. Senior administrator employees and recognize them informally for their good work</li> <li>7. Take the time to “pause” from projects and celebrate successes in between</li> <li>8. Foster kindness among employees</li> <li>9. Provide “feedback” box for people to recognize peers</li> <li>10. Develop employee inventory to identify how they like to be recognized and praised</li> <li>11. Empower employees through conversations and communications that earns their trust</li> <li>12. Recognize employees with emails and electronic notes</li> <li>13. Recognize personal things in their lives (i.e. birthdays)</li> <li>14. Host a social/party as a way to show appreciation</li> <li>15. Show appreciation in the moment</li> </ol>
Resources and Materials	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. Provide the opportunity for employees to ask for what they need to do their jobs</li> <li>17. Managers should make themselves more available to discuss resource and material needs</li> <li>18. Create and distribute a survey for employees to identify their resource needs</li> <li>19. Develop department handbooks</li> </ol>
Learn and grow	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20. Instead of providing a “memo” on what to do, offer a workshop and make it a training</li> <li>21. Find ways for employees to learn from each other</li> <li>22. Offer customer service training to employees</li> <li>23. Offer more “professional development opportunities for classified professionals</li> <li>24. Use convocation as an opportunity to learn and grow</li> <li>25. Support conference attendance for classified professionals</li> </ol>

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26. Create and distribute a survey for employees to identify ways they want to learn and grow
  27. Give employees time to use self-directed online programs—time to learn and grow individually
  28. Recognize and/or reward employees who take time to learn something new
  29. Provide opportunities for classified professionals to take on leadership roles through projects, etc.
  30. More ongoing trainings for staff
- 

The interviewees provided tangible examples for managers to consider for innovations, professional development, and interventions to improve employee engagement within their respective departments. One of the themes that emerged was how “simple” the strategies were to implement without much preparation or resources for the managers. These themes were shared with the managers as part of the development of their action plans for each of their respective departments/programs for the action research study innovation, which are explained in more detail in Chapter Three. The next set of findings evaluate how the innovations that were developed based on these interviews impacted Student Service employees’ self-reported engagement.

## **Results and Analysis of Research Question 2**

How and to what extent do manager interventions improve employee engagement among student services professionals? Do professional development programs adequately equip managers to become employee engagement champions? Do customized employee engagement action plans, developed by managers within the Student Services Division, lead to improving targeted constructs of employee engagement? The second research question and associated sub-questions guiding this study focused on measuring improvement interventions related to the elements of employee engagement to improve supports and services provided by employees of the

division to students. Results from the quantitative analysis are presented in three sections. First, reliability data are presented using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient analysis. The purpose of conducting a reliability analysis is to measure the consistency of the results of using a measurement instrument (Diem, 2004). This analyses will help ensure the pre- and post-items measured the same thing for internal consistency. Second, an analysis of the pre- and post-test data was conducted to analyze the results of the interventions, specifically an analysis of the three lowest elements (constructs) of employee engagement. This analysis consisted of a comparison of the mean, median, and standard deviations for each of the constructs to assess the impact of the interventions. Third, an independent samples t-test was conducted to test the differences between the two means of each of the three lowest elements of employee engagement for the same variables of the pre- and post-test of the study.

**Reliability of the Pre- and Post-survey Constructs.** Once completed, I closed the surveys, exported the data into an Excel document, and conducted an internal reliability analysis on the constructs and items through the use of the IBM SPSS© version 23 software to conduct the Cronbach Alpha coefficient analysis. According to George and Mallery (2003), Cronbach Alpha allows the researcher to assess possible measurement errors in the constructs and items of a survey instrument. It is recommended that constructs and items have a minimum coefficient between 0.65 and 0.80 (“Using and Interpreting Cronbach’s Alpha,” 2015). I measured reliability using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient on each construct and on the survey as a whole. “Internal consistency measures (such as Cronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficient) determine how well items contained in the questionnaire measure the “same thing” (Diem, 2004, p.5).

The results of the internal reliability analysis of the pre- and post-survey are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

*Internal Reliability Analysis of Pre- and Post-Survey Sub-Constructs*

Construct	Within Construct Items	Pre-Test N = 99	Post-Test N = 110
		Coefficient Alpha Estimate	Coefficient Alpha Estimate
Expectations at work	Items 1, 2, 3	0.80	0.90
Recognition of good work	Items 4, 5, 6	0.78	0.80
Connection to the mission or purpose	Items 7, 8, 9	0.83	0.85
Opportunity to learn and grow	Items 10, 11, 12	0.89	0.86
Resources and materials to do job	Items 13, 14, 15	0.86	0.88
Opportunity to do what you do best at work	Items 16, 17, 18	0.68	0.77
Supervisor, or someone at work, cares about you as a person	Items 19, 20, 21	0.72	0.72
Someone at work encourages development	Items 22, 23, 24	0.81	0.79
Opinions seem to count	Items 25, 26, 27	0.85	0.82
Commitment to quality work	Items 28, 29, 30	0.63	0.56
Working relationships with colleagues	Items 31, 32, 33	0.80	0.76
Goals and progress in the workplace	Items 34, 35, 36	0.40	0.65
Overall	Items 1 – 36	0.96	0.96

The overall alpha score for the pre-survey of 0.96 demonstrated “excellent” internal consistency and high internal reliability for the survey as a whole. Among the three sub-constructs identified as the lowest elements of employee engagement in the pre-survey (highlighted), 3 out of 3 scored a reliability coefficient higher than 0.65, which



meets the minimum standards according to “Using and Interpreting Cronbach’s Alpha” (2015). Two of the three constructs scored a reliability coefficient above 0.80 and as previously stated a Cronbach alpha of  $0.9 > \alpha \geq 0.8$  is considered “good” for internal consistency and reliability. One of the constructs, recognition of good work, scored a reliability coefficient of 0.78, which is “acceptable” for internal consistency and reliability as it is Cronbach alpha of  $0.8 > \alpha \geq 0.7$ .

The overall alpha score for the post-survey of 0.96 also demonstrated “excellent” internal consistency and high internal reliability for the survey as a whole. Among the three sub-constructs identified as the lowest elements of employee engagement in the pre-survey (highlighted), 3 out of 3 scored a reliability coefficient higher than 0.65, which meets the minimum standards according to “Using and Interpreting Cronbach’s Alpha” (2015). Each of these three constructs scored a reliability coefficient above 0.80 and as previously stated a Cronbach alpha of  $0.9 > \alpha \geq 0.8$  is considered “good” for internal consistency and reliability.

The final phase of my reliability analysis focused on the three elements of engagement that previous cycles of research (see Chapter 3) indicated were the lowest among Merced Student Services Employees. I began with the pre-survey responses and conducted an item-total statistics analysis for each of the sub-constructs to determine if the Cronbach’s Alpha score would increase or decrease if certain items were deleted from the sub-constructs. The results of this analysis are in Table 9.

Table 9

*Item-Total Statistics for Pre-Survey Sub-Constructs*

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Q1_1: I have received recognition or praise from someone at Merced College for doing good work in the past 7 days...	36.32	59.45	0.59	0.54	0.86
Q2_2: My supervisor finds ways to recognize me for doing quality work...	36.43	59.55	0.64	0.60	0.85
Q2_3: My colleagues find ways to recognize me for doing quality work...	36.08	63.19	0.58	0.45	0.86
Q4_1: I feel supported in growing professionally at Merced College...	35.97	59.18	0.71	0.72	0.85
Q4_2: Merced College provides sufficient <u>internal</u> professional development and training opportunities...	36.25	62.10	0.58	0.72	0.86
Q4_3: Merced College provides sufficient <u>external</u> professional development and training opportunities...	36.28	61.41	0.54	0.61	0.86
Q5_1: I have the resources and materials to do my job well...	35.71	64.10	0.57	0.56	0.86
Q5_2: When I need additional resources or materials to do my job, I am able to request them through Merced College's resource allocation process...	35.91	61.51	0.63	0.64	0.85
Q5_3: My supervisor ensures I have the resources and materials I need to do my job...	35.75	61.75	0.64	0.67	0.85

As you will recall from Table 8 above, the total overall alpha score of the nine items for the pre-survey was 0.96. Each of the nine items, if deleted, would lower the overall Cronbach's Alpha score. I concluded, based on this analysis, all nine items contributed information to the reliability of the sub-constructs for the pre-survey instrument. This indicates that there was a high level of internal consistency for these sub-constructs. Because these analyses indicated that the survey items were fully and collectively capturing the intended constructs, I created variables for each construct in the pre-survey, which included customized action plans, developed by each of the managers within the Student Services Division, for each of their departments. The action plans and customized interventions were the independent variable for this study.

Next, I conducted the same analysis on the three lowest elements (constructs) for the nine items of the post-survey. The results of this analysis are in Table 10.

Table 10

*Item-Total Statistics for Post-Survey Sub-Constructs*

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Q1_1: I have received recognition or praise from someone at Merced College for doing good work in the past 7 days...	35.38	65.47	0.54	0.54	0.88
Q2_2: My supervisor finds ways to recognize me for doing quality work...	35.39	63.53	0.69	0.61	0.86
Q2_3: My colleagues find ways to recognize me for doing quality work...	35.11	70.10	0.47	0.44	0.88

Q4_1: I feel supported in growing professionally at Merced College...	35.11	67.35	0.62	0.58	0.87
Q4_2: Merced College provides sufficient <u>internal</u> professional development and training opportunities...	35.25	67.58	0.61	0.54	0.87
Q4_3: Merced College provides sufficient <u>external</u> professional development and training opportunities...	35.51	63.68	0.71	0.70	0.86
Q5_1: I have the resources and materials to do my job well...	34.98	66.94	0.67	0.72	0.86
Q5_2: When I need additional resources or materials to do my job, I am able to request them through Merced College's resource allocation process...	35.13	67.60	0.63	0.58	0.87
Q5_3: My supervisor ensures I have the resources and materials I need to do my job...	34.96	65.25	0.74	0.73	0.86

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As you will recall from Table 10 above, the total overall alpha score of the nine items for the post-survey was 0.96. Again, my analysis concluded that each of the nine items, if deleted, would lower the overall Cronbach's Alpha score. I concluded, based on this analysis, all nine items contributed information to the reliability of the sub-constructs for the post-survey instrument. This indicates that there was a high level of internal consistency for these sub-constructs. Because these analyses indicated that the survey items were fully and collectively capturing the intended constructs, I concluded the

variables for each construct in the post-survey, which included customized action plans, were appropriately developed to address the lowest elements of employee engagement within the Student Services Division. The action plans and customized interventions were the independent variable for this study.

**Analysis of the Pre- and Post-survey Data.** My analyses to address Research Question 2 draw from the pre- and post-survey variables that were created based on the reliability analysis described here. The measures represent Student Services employees' perceptions, both before the innovation (pre-survey), and after the innovation (post-survey) of the nine dimensions of employee engagement: *expectations at work, recognition of good work, connection to the mission, learn and grow, resources and materials, doing what you do best, someone cares about you, someone encourages development, opinion seems to count, commitment to quality work, relationships with colleagues, and goals and progress.*

To analyze the differences between the distribution of quantitative variables of the 12 sub-constructs of the study, I began my analysis by comparing the descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, median, and standard deviations) for the pre-survey to the and post-survey responses for each sub-construct (see Table 11).

Table 11

*Pre- and Post-Survey Descriptive Statistics of Each Sub-Construct*

	Pre-Survey N = 99			Post-Survey N = 110		
	Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Expectations at work	5.24	5.33	0.84	5.19	5.33	1.04
Recognition of good work	4.36	4.67	1.18	4.31	4.67	1.29
Connection to the mission	5.50	5.67	0.59	5.49	5.67	0.62
Learn and grow	4.41	4.67	1.26	4.31	4.33	1.23
Resources and materials	4.79	5.00	1.11	4.59	5.00	1.18
Doing what you do best	5.01	5.00	0.90	5.10	5.33	0.91
Someone cares about you	4.85	5.00	0.84	4.95	5.00	0.78
Someone encourages development	4.84	5.00	0.95	4.80	5.00	1.00
Opinion seems to count	4.84	5.00	0.96	4.88	5.00	0.98
Commitment to quality work	5.44	5.67	0.66	5.45	5.67	0.63
Relationships with colleagues	5.19	5.33	0.84	5.19	5.33	0.78
Goals and progress	5.12	5.00	0.71	5.21	5.33	0.83

*Note:* SD = Standard Deviation. The scales for each item were 6 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Agree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strong Disagree.

The three lowest elements of employee engagement on the pre-survey were *recognition of good work*, *learn and grow*, and *resources and materials*. The pre-survey

mean for the sub-construct *recognition of good work* was 4.3586 and the post-survey mean was 4.31. The mean is lower for the post-survey among the participants for sub-construct *recognition of good work*. The pre-survey mean for the sub-construct *learn and grow* was 4.41 and the post-survey mean was 4.31. The mean score was slightly lower among the participants of the post-survey for the sub-construct *learn and grow*. Finally, the pre-survey mean for the sub-construct *resources and materials* was 4.79 and the post-survey mean was 4.59. The mean was also lower for the sub-construct *resources and materials* among the participants of the post-survey. Notably, these sub-constructs had the highest standard deviation scores with *recognition of good work* at 1.29, *learn and grow* at 1.23, and *resources and materials* at 1.18. Since the standard deviation represents how the scores for the survey are spread out from the mean, the higher standard deviations scores for these sub-constructs suggest the scores are spread out over a larger range of values compared to the other sub-constructs and perhaps a larger variance in opinion related to these items by the participants. Finally, the mean and medians, for both the pre-survey and post-survey, were fairly consistent and suggested the scores were more or less evenly distributed among the presented values. Based on these scores, I concluded the action plans and interventions did not improve the levels of employee engagement among these sub-constructs.

In terms of the nine other dimensions of employee engagement, three resulted in slightly lower overall mean scores in the post-survey for the sub-constructs *expectations at work* (Pre-Survey Mean = 5.24; Post-Survey Mean = 5.19), *connection to the mission* (Pre-Survey Mean = 5.50; Post-Survey Mean = 5.49), and *someone encourages development* (Pre-Survey Mean = 4.84; Post-Survey Mean = 4.80). Five resulted in

slightly higher overall mean scores in the post-survey for the sub-constructs *doing what you do best* (Pre-Survey Mean = 5.01; Post-Survey Mean = 5.10), *someone at work cares about you* (Pre-Survey Mean = 4.85; Post-Survey Mean = 4.95), *opinion seems to count* (Pre-Survey Mean = 4.84; Post-Survey Mean = 4.88), *commitment to quality work* (Pre-Survey Mean = 5.44; Post-Survey Mean = 5.45), and *goals and progress* (Pre-Survey Mean = 5.12; Post-Survey Mean = 5.21). The standard deviation scores for the other nine sub-constructs were all fairly low for the pre-survey ranging from 0.59 to 0.96. and the scores for the post-survey were all less than 1.00 with the exception of *expectations at work* (SD = 1.04) and *someone encourages development* (SD = 1.00). This suggested these scores were all closer to the mean for each of the nine sub-constructs compared to the sub-constructs identified as the three lowest. Finally, the mean and medians for these nine sub-constructs, for both the pre-survey and post-survey, were also fairly consistent and suggested the scores were more or less evenly distributed among the presented values.

To understand whether the means for pre- and post-surveys significantly differed for each construct and evaluate whether employees' levels of employee engagement increased due to the targeted interventions were implemented by managers, I conducted a series of independent-samples *t* test. The results from the independent-samples *t* test are in Table 12.



Table 12

*Independent-Samples T-Tests*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Expectations at work	Equal variances assumed	0.81	0.37	0.38	207.00	0.70	0.05	0.13	-0.21	0.31
	Equal variances not assumed			0.39	204.55	0.70	0.05	0.13	-0.21	0.31
Recognition of good work	Equal variances assumed	0.56	0.46	0.25	205.00	0.80	0.04	0.17	-0.30	0.38
	Equal variances not assumed			0.26	205.00	0.80	0.04	0.17	-0.29	0.38
Connection to the mission or purpose	Equal variances assumed	0.00	1.00	0.03	202.00	0.97	0.00	0.09	-0.16	0.17
	Equal variances not assumed			0.03	201.67	0.97	0.00	0.08	-0.16	0.17
Opportunity to learn and grow	Equal variances assumed	0.04	0.84	0.59	199.00	0.56	0.10	0.18	-0.24	0.45

	Equal variances not assumed			0.59	196.45	0.56	0.10	0.18	-0.24	0.45
Resources and materials to do job	Equal variances assumed	0.68	0.41	1.23	200.00	0.22	0.20	0.16	-0.12	0.51
	Equal variances not assumed			1.23	199.72	0.22	0.20	0.16	-0.12	0.51
Opportunity to do what you do best at work	Equal variances assumed	0.02	0.89	-0.69	198.00	0.49	-0.09	0.13	-0.34	0.16
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.69	197.29	0.49	-0.09	0.13	-0.34	0.16
Supervisor, or someone at work, cares about you as a person	Equal variances assumed	0.14	0.71	-0.85	198.00	0.39	-0.10	0.11	-0.32	0.13
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.85	193.66	0.40	-0.10	0.12	-0.33	0.13
Someone at work encourages development	Equal variances assumed	0.25	0.62	0.31	198.00	0.76	0.04	0.14	-0.23	0.32
	Equal variances not assumed			0.31	197.79	0.76	0.04	0.14	-0.23	0.31
Opinions seem to count	Equal variances assumed	0.13	0.72	-0.31	196.00	0.76	-0.04	0.14	-0.31	0.23
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.31	195.30	0.76	-0.04	0.14	-0.31	0.23

Commitment to quality work	Equal variances assumed	0.06	0.81	-0.06	197.00	0.95	-0.01	0.09	-0.19	0.18
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.06	194.81	0.95	-0.01	0.09	-0.19	0.18
Working relationships with colleagues	Equal variances assumed	0.03	0.87	0.06	196.00	0.95	0.01	0.12	-0.22	0.23
	Equal variances not assumed			0.06	191.18	0.95	0.01	0.12	-0.22	0.24
Goals and progress in the workplace	Equal variances assumed	1.61	0.21	-0.81	196.00	0.42	-0.09	0.11	-0.31	0.13
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.82	195.04	0.41	-0.09	0.11	-0.31	0.13

No statistically significant differences (at a level of  $p < 0.05$ ) existed for the sub-construct *recognition of good work* ( $4.32 \pm 1.29$ ) at the end of the intervention compared to their initial self-reported experiences with recognition of good work ( $4.36 \pm 1.18$ ),  $t(205) = 0.254$ ,  $p = 0.80$ ). The results were also not statistically significant for the sub-construct *learn and grow* pre-survey ( $4.42 \pm 1.26$ ) versus post-survey ( $4.31 \pm 1.23$ ;  $t(199) = 0.590$ ,  $p = 0.56$ ). Similarly, I observed no significant differences for the sub-construct *resources and materials* at the end of the intervention ( $4.50 \pm 1.18$ ) compared to before ( $4.79 \pm 1.11$ ),  $t(200) = 1.23$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ). Taken together, the independent sample t-test results indicated the lowest levels of employee engagement did not increase from the short-term interventions of this action research study.

In terms of the other nine sub-constructs of employee engagement with no interventions as a part of this study, no statistically significant differences (at a level of  $p < 0.05$ ) in scores between the pre-survey and post-survey results were observed. No significant differences were observed for the sub-constructs between the post-survey versus the pre-survey results for *expectations at work* ( $5.19 \pm 1.04$ ) and ( $5.24 \pm 0.84$ ),  $t(205) = 0.38$ ,  $p = 0.70$ ), *connection to the mission or purpose* ( $5.49 \pm 0.62$ ) and ( $5.50 \pm 0.59$ ),  $t(202) = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.97$ ), *opportunity to do what you do best at work* ( $5.10 \pm 0.91$ ) and ( $5.01 \pm 0.90$ ),  $t(198) = -0.69$ ,  $p = 0.49$ ), *supervisor or someone at work, cares about you as a person* ( $4.95 \pm 0.78$ ) and ( $4.85 \pm 0.84$ ),  $t(198) = -0.85$ ,  $p = 0.39$ ), *someone at work encourages development* ( $4.80 \pm 1.00$ ) and ( $4.84 \pm 0.95$ ),  $t(198) = 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.76$ ), *opinions seem to count* ( $4.88 \pm 0.98$ ) and ( $4.84 \pm 0.96$ ),  $t(196) = -0.31$ ,  $p = 0.77$ ), *commitment to quality work* ( $5.45 \pm 0.63$ ) and ( $5.44 \pm 0.66$ ),  $t(197) = -0.06$ ,  $p = 0.95$ ), *working relationships with colleagues* ( $5.19 \pm 0.78$ ) and ( $5.19 \pm 0.84$ ),  $t(196) = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.95$ ), and *goals and progress in the workplace* ( $5.20 \pm 0.83$ ) and ( $5.12 \pm 0.71$ ),  $t(196) = -0.81$ ,  $p = 0.42$ ). In summary, the independent sample t-test results indicated the remaining nine levels (sub-constructs) of employee engagement no significant difference between pre-survey and post-survey results.

## Summary

This chapter summarized and presented the data and data analysis including descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis, and an independent-samples  $t$  test to address the two research questions. The purpose of this mixed methods action research study was to identify and attempt to address lowest levels of employee engagement through the use of a valid assessment tool for student services employees.

For the first research question, the results of the qualitative interviews resulted in significant findings to identify factors and best practices to help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College. The findings included the identification of three major themes related to the role of managers in improving Merced College Student Services employee engagement: 1) Ensure managers are familiar with the goals and purposes of employee engagement, 2) Establish managers as drivers or influencers of employee engagement in the workplace, and 3) Develop simple interventions as influencers to improve employee engagement in the workplace. These findings resulted in the development of structured action plans for each department/program manager, using for the intervention of this action research study. Additionally, managers relied on the innovation strategies (See Table 7) identified as a part of the qualitative results for the first research question.

For research question two, a qualitative artifact analyses of the manager action plans indicated the structured professional development programs, completed by all Student Services Division administrators and managers in April 2018 and May 2018 as a part of this action research study, suggested they were adequately equipped to become employee engagement champions. The action plan template (See Appendix D) required each manager to develop customized interventions with identified strategies for improvement, action steps, deadlines, and resources. Further evidence of the professional development programs equipping the managers to become employee engagement champions, were their connections to Kahn's (1990) Theory of Employee Engagement psychological conditions (meaningfulness, safety, and availability) to each of the three sub-constructs for their action plans.

However, for research question two, results of the descriptive statistics analysis and the independent-samples  $t$  test showed that the short-term interventions for this action research study, the employee engagement action plans, no significant difference in the scores of the lowest elements of employee engagement among student services employees at Merced College. However, open-ended questions on the post-survey instrument suggested that at least some employees are experiencing improvements as a result of the targeted action plans and interventions from this study.

Related to recognition of good work, one employee commented they “feel grateful to have a supervisor who cares about employee growth and would like to see a more "pleasant productive" environment... I think when managers have their staff "buy in" to how they think things could be better....is half the battle.” Another comment suggested experiencing a more positive work environment and “consideration regarding employee opportunities and engagement.” Further commenting that “a positive work environment makes such a difference to staff and students.” Finally, one of the open-ended comments included their attitude toward being a part of an organization invested in their opportunities to learn and grow. The employee stated “it feels great to work at an institution that is so invested in the professional growth of it's staff. In the short time that I have worked at Merced College I have seen how it helps strengthen morale and overall job performance. I hope we keep up this focus on learning and growing for a long time.” Overall, these comments suggested the interventions may be making positive changes towards improving employee engagement and long-term results might yield increased employee engagement scores after several iterations of this action research study have been completed.

Chapter Five concludes this study and summarizes the results with relation to the literature, lessons learned, implications for action and research, limitations, study validity, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

This chapter is a summary of the action research study along with the results in relation to the literature, lessons learned, implications for action and research, limitations, study validity, and recommendations for future research. This problem of practice was developed to examine and improve the levels of employee engagement among student services professionals. As a result of the listening tour, early in my tenure as an administrator at Merced College, I decided there was a need to focus on employee engagement and, to specifically, increase the levels of employee engagement among staff, faculty members, and managers in the MC Student Services Division to improve overall support and services to students. With scarce resources and increased demand to provide quality services to students in higher education, I developed an intervention to increase the levels of employee engagement among the workforce in the MC Student Services Division.

Based on the lowest employee engagement scores from a pre-intervention survey completed by MC Student Services employees, managers of each department developed customized action plans. The action plans sought to foster change by focusing on what existing research identified as a key cause of organizational performance and student satisfaction: professional employee engagement. Further, the action plans relied on the impact of managers' roles to improve employee engagement through intentional and customized interventions for each department/program within the MC Student Services Division.



As a reminder, the study sought to answer two research questions:

- RQ 1: What factors and best practices will help managers improve employee engagement in the Student Services Division at Merced College?
- RQ 2: How and to what extent does manager interventions improve employee engagement among student services professionals?
- Do professional development programs adequately equip managers to become employee engagement champions?
  - Do customized employee engagement action plans, developed by managers within the Student Services Division, lead to improving targeted constructs of employee engagement?

The results identified the factors and best practices needed for managers to improve employee engagement, including the lowest elements of employee engagement.

However, the results of the study indicated that, at the very least, short-term interventions and customized employee engagement plans developed by managers do not improve employee engagement among student services professionals, but they do equip managers to become employee engagement champions.

## **Discussion of Results**

**Research Question One.** Based on the results of the one-on-one interviews with faculty, classified professionals (staff), and managers, several themes and best practices to help managers improve employee engagement were identified. Three major themes emerged as a result of this study: 1) Ensure managers are familiar with the goals and purposes of employee engagement, 2) Establish managers as drivers or influencers of employee engagement in the workplace, and 3) Develop simple interventions as

influencers to improve employee engagement in the workplace. These three major themes were coded as “familiarity,” “driver,” and “intervention.”

Based on the analyses of the interviews, it was clear that managers within the Student Services Division shared a general consensus of the purpose and goals of employee engagement in the workplace. This supports research that managers, if they fully understand and apply it to the workplace, serve as a dimension of psychological safety for employees and play a key role in facilitating employee engagement in the workplace (Kahn, 1990). As a result of their knowledge and understanding, managers were able to develop customized action plans for each of their respective departments, which they implemented between June 2018 and October 2018 (See Sample Action Plan in Appendix E). The action plans consisted of strategies for improvement for each of the three sub-constructs scoring the lowest on the pre-survey instrument (*recognition and praise, opportunity to learn and grow, and materials and equipment to do my job*). For example, for the sub-construct *recognition and praise*, one of the student services managers conducted Friday evening phone calls and left messages for their employees recognizing staff achievements from the week. Another example, for the sub-construct *learn and grow*, included a student services manager allowing their employees to choose one professional development training or program of their choosing for the fall 2018 term.

These action plans are not only further evidence of their levels of familiarity of both the goals and importance, but also their ability to synthesize the concepts of employee engagement and put them into practice. In the book, *Employee Engagement: Tools for Analysis, Practice, and Competitive Advantage*, Macey, Schneider, Barbera,

and Young (2009) posit that managers who comprehend and “buy-in” to the value of employee engagement are able to effectively action plan and drive change within the culture of an organization.

Additionally, this action research study indicated that managers are recognized as the drivers or leaders of employee engagement in the workplace. “The primary importance of leadership, and particularly line management, is consistently cited as a major factor in engagement” (Patrnchak, 2013, p.11). As previously discussed in Chapter 4, all seven interviews with employees within the student services division shared a common theme that managers were a primary driver and/or influencer of employee engagement in the workplace. Luthens et al (2002) recognized as a part of their study on employee engagement and manager self-efficacy that managers are vital in creating an environment for their employees to become engaged in the workplace—citing both emotional and cognitive engagement aligned with Kahn’s (1990, 1992) employee engagement theory. Further, “employees who have strong emotional ties to their managers, who feel that their opinions count, and who believe their managers have an interest in their development (i.e. emotional engagement) are more likely to positively respond to their managers and produce favorable outcomes that help the managers to be more effective” (p.385). Triangulated with similar research studies, such as the employee engagement studies in the context of firefighters and healthcare workers, managers have the ability to directly enhance employee improvement and engagement through the actions and attitudes of the employees’ direct supervisor (Rich, Lepine, and Crawford, 2010; Patrnchak, 2013).

Finally, interventions, driven by managers, were identified as a key strategy to

influence and improve employee engagement. Interviewees identified innovation strategies (See Table 7 in Chapter 4) for managers to consider when developing action plans to improve employee engagement related to the three lowest employee engagement elements: recognition of good work, resources and materials, and learn and grow. The results confirmed that simple interventions were perceived as essential components of the action plans to improve employee engagement among the student services professionals within the MC Student Services Division. Best practices (interventions) should be aligned with survey results to provide managers with ideas and concepts to build effective action plans for their teams (Macey et. al, 2009).

**Research Question Two.** The purpose of the second research question and sub-questions were to evaluate the effectiveness of the manager interventions as well as to determine managers' abilities to become employee engagement champions. Comparing the results of the pre-intervention survey to the post-intervention survey, the short-term interventions had no statistically significant impact on improving employee engagement among the three lowest elements for student services professionals in the MC Student Services Division (See Table 13).

Table 13

*Pre- and Post-Intervention Descriptive Statistics for Three Lowest Elements*

	Pre-Survey N = 99			Post-Survey N = 110		
	Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Recognition of good work	4.36	4.67	1.18	4.31	4.67	1.29
Learn and grow	4.41	4.67	1.26	4.31	4.33	1.23
Resources and materials	4.79	5.00	1.11	4.59	5.00	1.18

*Note:* None of the mean differences between pre- and post- were statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

The results of the intervention did not lead to drastic improvements among employee engagement scores between the pre- and post-surveys. Based on the post-survey scores for the three lowest sub-constructs, recognition of good work, resources and materials, and opportunity to learn and grow, I concluded the action plans and interventions did not improve the levels of employee engagement within the short-term at all. Of course, this raises the question does this mean the interventions were not effective or is one cycle of interventions, in a short time span, enough to measure such improvement. Research supports that it is unrealistic to expect dramatic improvements between survey administrations after one iteration of interventions for employee engagement (Macey et. al, 2009; Patrnchak, 2013). One possible reason for these results is that it may be unrealistic to see changes within one year. With regards to implementing employee engagement interventions and seeing results, “gains in the aggregate can be substantial and significant over successive years” (Macey et. al, 2009, p.121). Related to the effects not being observable in the short-term, another possible reason for these results might include that the quantitative data does not fully capture the changes of employees’ experiences given the complexity and multidimensional constructs of employee engagement.

The survey results provided an aggregate reflection of the entire Student Services Division versus department/program or individual employee perceptions, which indicated no improvements of the three lower levels of employee engagement. Although developed by managers for specific departments/programs, the action plans were not individualized for each employee nor did the results reflect the individual needs of specific employees. One explanation for this may be related to the nature of quantitative

research, which essentially focuses on the aggregated data results. It is possible that some employees did experience improvement in one or more of the three constructs included in the action plans. However, the quantitative data are capturing the entire population results. Although the aggregate data indicated no significant changes, it is possible a subset of individuals did experience improvements as a result of the intervention. Further, individual improvements could vary depending on who experienced the different innovations, as well as other individual characteristics (e.g., how long someone worked at Merced College, external influences, past work experiences).

It is also fair to ask were the interventions ineffective due to the generalized nature of the action plans. Gruman and Saks (2011) highlighted in their research that employee engagement surveys for the management of employee engagement has limitations when organizations use them in a pre-intervention and post-intervention method for improvement. This may also be a reason for the lack of improvement of the scores of this study as they suggest when the results of an employee engagement survey are used to develop interventions and potential drivers to improve conditions as a “one-size-fits-all” model. This model develops limitations in addressing the individualized needs of employees. Thus, “the best approach for improving employee engagement might depend on each employee rather than aggregate levels of various conditions” (p.127). Further, Kahn (1990) cautioned researchers and practitioners that individuals view psychological conditions and their personal levels of engagement or disengagement differently and from different perspectives. Given my action research study used the “one-size-fits-all” model as a part of the action plans, this may be one explanation as to

why there was not an increase in the scores of the three lowest elements of employee engagement.

Finally, the action plans were developed by 11 different managers. The results may have been impacted by different management styles and varying levels of execution of the action plans. It is also possible that some managers took the implementation of the action plans more seriously than others, which may have also impacted the aggregated data results of the action research study.

The independent-samples *t* test results indicated there were not statistically significant improvements for the three lowest sub-constructs of the study. The post-survey participants for the sub-constructs *recognition of good work* ( $4.32 \pm 1.29$ ) at the end of the intervention compared to the pre-test scores ( $4.36 \pm 1.18$ ),  $t(205) = 0.254$ ,  $p = 0.80$ ), *learn and grow* ( $4.31 \pm 1.23$ ) at the end of the intervention compared to the pre-test scores ( $4.42 \pm 1.26$ ),  $t(199) = 0.590$ ,  $p = 0.556$ ), *resources and materials* ( $4.50 \pm 1.18$ ) at the end of the intervention compared to the pre-test scores ( $4.79 \pm 1.11$ ),  $t(200) = 1.23$ ,  $p = 0.222$ ) were all found to be not significant ( $p$  value is greater than 0.05).

Research supports that interventions to improve employee engagement need to be a series of well-integrated and connected practices within the organization for them to be effective and lead to improvement (Gruman & Saks, 2011). In fact, according to the Gallup Organization, positive changes in employee engagement within organizations are often substantial and lasting, but it is typical for it to happen over extended years of time (Wagner & Harter, 2006).

Finally, the professional development workshops provided to the managers proved to be an adequate method to equip managers to become employee engagement

champions. Cook (2015) posited that professional development programs, educating managers on the value of employee engagement and providing facilitated discussion on employee engagement survey results, have long-term implications on engagement scores for an organization. This study confirmed that professional development properly prepared managers to develop targeted and customized interventions for the purposes of improvement and provided them with the tools to serve as employee engagement champions within their respective departments/programs.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study have implications for human resource professionals seeking to improve organizational performance, specially employee engagement, as well as institutions of higher education looking to find creative solutions to improving workplace engagement and performance and student customer service.

Since Kahn (1990) first discovered the theory of employee engagement, much work has been completed, but there remains a great deal to learn about the implications of practice in the workplace. Further, while there have been few studies completed on employee engagement in the context of higher education, the benefits to any organization are clear. Among these benefits include higher productivity, increased retention, happier employees, better customer service, and overall organizational success. The bottom line is “employee engagement is affected by and also has an effect on organizational success... success causes engagement and engagement causes success such that a positive success cycle is created” (Macey et. al, 2009, p.74). This study confirmed managers comprehend the application of employee engagement in the workplace through action planning.



Institutions initial step should be to get a sense of the levels of employee engagement within their organization. Starting with a pre-intervention survey based on Gallup's 12 element of employee engagement (or one of the many other employee engagement survey tools) is a useful assessment to determine what areas of focus to build intervention action plans. This approach is both rooted in practice and research. Several scholars have identified a pre-intervention survey identifying varying levels and behaviors of employees related to workplace engagement as a best practice in human resources development (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Schaufeli et al., 2002, Wagner & Harter, 2006; Rothbard, 2001; Macey et al., 2009). "Well-designed and implemented survey diagnostics are an efficient approach to identifying where to direct action in a specific setting" (Macey et al., 2009, p.79). Specifically, an engagement survey was found to be a practical tool for managers to develop an action plan for improvement.

Institutions of higher education are uniquely suited to develop intervention plans to improve employee engagement with human resources practitioners, internal researchers, and managers committed to providing students with quality service. Most human resources department are tasked with helping managers create and implement professional development programs. With the help of internal researchers to develop the survey instrument and human resources professionals to assist with action planning, senior level administrators and frontline managers could easily embrace the theory of employee engagement and implement intervention strategies through structured action and professional development programs. Employee engagement interventions are best suited at the department level and institutions of higher education, especially within the student support services areas, are typically organized by department/programs with mid-

level managers for each area. Data from this action research also suggested that manager involvement is essential to implementing an employee engagement intervention and action plan. Investing in management understanding, knowledge, and buy-in of employee engagement will lead to a more engaged workforce and superior levels of management.

Based on the outcomes of the post-intervention survey, I recommend a more sustained and longitudinal approach to assessing the impact of the interventions. I plan to continue with future iterations of this action research study to assess the long-term impact of the interventions on the elements of employee engagement among the student services professionals. Further, I plan to implement additional resources and support to provide managers ongoing professional development to effectively implement their action plans and make adjustments as needed for each of their respective departments/programs.

Macey et al. (2009) recognized that to build and sustain an engaged workforce, employee engagement interventions must be considered a continual and iterative process.

Another area of consideration for future practice is the concept of embedding the constructs of employee engagement into the hiring and onboarding processes within the practices of the human resources department. Several organizations, such as Gallup and Zappos, have found creative ways to embed an assessment of an employees' strengths and overall "fit" in the organizational culture as a way to build engagement and align with core values as a part of the hiring process (Gillespie, 2012). Future iterations of this action research should consider building an assessment as part of the application and hiring process of an applicant's strengths as they align with the constructs of employee engagement, including Kahn's psychological dimensions of meaningfulness, availability, and safety. Embedding this practice into the hiring process could help organizations

ensure, through the onboarding process, that they are hiring individuals who align with the values and principles of highly engaged employees; thus, leading to organizational change in culture.

### **Implications for Research**

For institutions of higher education, we are often cautioned to refer to students as customers or consumers, but research also supports how consumerism is a trend in higher education and a factor that should not be ignored. For these reasons, investments in employee engagement interventions to improve overall workplace engagement and, ultimately, customer service to students is something institutions should consider. While this study did not seek to correlate employee engagement directly with student satisfaction, it certainly provided the foundation to further investigate this possible phenomena in higher education as a tool to better serve students in higher education.

As previously mentioned in the literature review section, I was unable to identify any other formal studies of employee engagement using Gallup's dimensions of engagement in a college or university setting. The reliability analysis of the survey instrument suggested an overall strong efficacy for future studies. The overall alpha score for both the pre- and post-survey instruments of 0.96 demonstrated "excellent" internal consistency and high internal reliability for the survey as a whole. Based on this analysis, I would recommend this survey instrument to researchers seeking to replicate this study. However, it should be noted that there were a few constructs with lower reliabilities, including goals and progress in the workplace ( $\alpha_{\text{pretest}}=0.40/\alpha_{\text{posttest}}=0.65$ ) and commitment to quality work ( $\alpha_{\text{pretest}}=0.63/\alpha_{\text{posttest}}=0.56$ ). Future iterations of this research study, using this survey instrument, may want examine ways to strengthen the

reliabilities of these two constructs.

This study did not directly examine Kahn's (1990) identified three psychological conditions of engagement: meaningfulness, availability, and safety. Future research may seek to further investigate the connection between Gallup's 12 elements of employee engagement and Kahn's Theory of Engagement, specifically the three psychological conditions. This study educated managers on the psychological conditions and instructed them to crosswalk and integrate them as a part of their action plans, but no formal research was conducted to study the correlation between the two theoretical frameworks.

Finally, as previously mentioned, future iterations of this study should consider the longitudinal impact of employee engagement interventions in the workplace. As discovered, employee engagement requires sustained campaigns and implementations of best practices. Future studies should consider a multiyear cycle of research to examine the longer term effects of the interventions.

### **Limitations**

I have considered several limitations for this action research study. One of the limitations of this study is related to the participant demographics. The survey participants were, generally, similar to the population of Merced College Student Services employees in terms of gender and race. On average, however, participants had slightly higher levels of educational attainment and were less likely to self-identify as faculty. Also, the participants of the study were disproportionately more likely to be in full-time positions. While this does not change the results of the study, it does present a question of whether the results are representative of all MC Student Services employees and, thus, identified as a potential limitation of the overall study.

Further, serving as an insider to the research is both a strength and limitation. Specifically, it is a limitation as an insider, if not careful, can bias or influence the findings of the study. It has and will serve as a strength for future iterations, however, as I am intimately familiar with the climate and culture of the organization. To address my positionality as an insider researcher, I requested the assistance of Merced College Professor, Jonae Pistoiresi, to conduct the one-on-one interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, I conducted the analyses to avoid participant bias as a part of the process.

Additionally, there is limited research in the field related to employee engagement specific to student support services in higher education. With the exception of a handful of dissertations by doctoral students, it was difficult to find explicit research directly related to this problem of practice. Instead, implicit examples of employee engagement and making the connection to “students as customers” is used to review this correlation and assertion that higher levels of employee engagement will improve services provided by employees to students.

Finally, there is some opposition to the focus and emphasis of employee engagement as a construct for organizational performance. In the Strategic HR Review, Guaspari (2015) suggests that organizations should refrain from focusing on employee engagement because it is not a measured outcome rather it is a secondary benefit from doing other things well—suggesting organizations should instead focus on infusing one thing that actually drives engagement (i.e. respect). Additionally, Masson, Royal, Agnew, and Fine (2008) like other researchers, criticize employee engagement usage in

organizational improvement for lacking an agreed upon and consistent definition and measurement in the field (as cited by Gruman and Saks, 2011).

### **Lessons Learned**

I have often referred to myself as a “novice” researcher. However, this action research study has increased my technical knowledge of research as well as helped me develop as a practitioner to implement cycles of continuous quality improvement in the workplace. As an administrator in higher education, I have learned to appreciate action research as a tool to improve practices within the workplace and refine action plans through iterative research cycles (Mertler, 2014).

I genuinely thought I knew a lot more about qualitative research than I actually did. My baseline knowledge came from earlier courses in the Arizona State University Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College program and earlier iterations of my action research project. In simplified terms, I thought of qualitative research as typically interviews and observations—not knowing the many other forms and types. I knew the basics of the purpose and types of qualitative research, but my real lack of knowledge was in the areas of methodologies, theories, and understanding the comprehensive nature and “richness” of qualitative research. I knew very little about the various theoretical perspectives related to qualitative research or the extensiveness of data analysis as part of the qualitative research process.

Most notably, I have learned a great deal about the purpose of theoretical perspective in qualitative research. I have grown to appreciate and value the discovery process of qualitative inquiry by finding meaning through the participants of my study. Practicing constructivism, qualitative research has taught me that the perspectives of my

employees are much more valuable and insightful as to how to improve employee engagement in the workplace than anything I could deduct as an insider action researcher on my own. Further, I have gained an understanding as to how there is no absolute truth when it comes to improving employee engagement rather there is a “truth” waiting to be discovered through the views, values, and experiences of the employees at Merced College—this was a powerful learning experience for me.

I have also learned immense knowledge about conducting quantitative research, and frankly, how much I prefer it when conducting research. While I value and appreciate the importance of both research methodologies, throughout the research process I found myself more drawn to objectivities and single realities, which are more closely associated with quantitative research. Specifically, I was more intrigued with the results of research question two of study as it required me to deductively reason a relatively large amount of information related to my workplace and employee workforce. The quantitative data allowed me to quickly analyze the levels of employee engagement, which fits both my personality type and availability to conduct research as a practitioner. Finally, given the nature of my study, I found the more focused topic of employee engagement allowed for greater specificity in my research questions with help me narrow my scope for future iterations of research in this area.

Finally, as I reflect on the learnings from this process, I found inclusivity and positionality unique attributes of exemplary action research and contextualized research in higher education. As an administrator in higher education, I relate to what Herr and Anderson (2015) suggest as the researcher being an insider participate in the research process. Recognition of positionality is vital in action research and higher education

research. Since self-reflection is a primary role for the action researcher, there are certain dilemmas to resolve such as the potential "consequences for the study's trustworthiness and on the ethics of the research" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p.59). The action researcher's position (role) as an insider within the organization can bias the results of the study if not appropriately addressed with critical examination and tools in place to ensure credible outcomes. Additionally, the action researcher's positionality may lend itself to political implications, prejudice, bias, or even overly positive reflection of one's research. For this reason, the action researcher must employ mechanisms to appropriately address this potential pitfall of positionality.

For the purposes of this action research dissertation study, I consider myself as an “insider” action researcher. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), the positionality of a researcher as an “insider” is when the researcher focuses on their own practice or practice setting. I have spent the better part of the past 13 years in higher education administration. I have served as a director, dean, vice president, and now president. During this time, I have always focused on improving workplace environments to get the best of employees. I have found over the years that highly engaged workforces are more productive, loyal, committed to quality work, and overall, make the workplace a generally fun and exciting place to work. "Perhaps the most important advantage of the practitioner-as-researcher model is the knowledge it yields about local conditions... Neither are generalizations about institutions or interventions always applicable... The knowledge about a particular institution developed by its own members is usually more relevant than knowledge about higher education in general developed by experts" (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman & Vallejo, 2004, p.124).



## **Conclusion**

One major finding of this study is that managers who participate in employee engagement professional development programs are able to effectively develop and implement action plans as employee engagement champions within the workplace. As a part of the literature review process, this action research study identified how higher levels of employee engagement benefit organizations, including the benefits to student satisfaction and customer service in higher education.

Additionally, this study created the basis to improve levels of employment engagement among student services professionals in higher education. The survey instrument, professional development workshops for managers, and the action planning template will be vital in supporting future iterations of this action research project for Merced College and other institutions of higher education. Administrators in higher education are often spread thin, work long hours, and balance many competing priorities. The resources developed, as a part of this action research study, will assist administrators in implementing a professional development program to improve productivity in the workplace, improve student (customer) satisfaction, and get better results from their employees.

Even though the post-survey scores for participants of this study did not result in improved levels of employee engagement, this cycle of research did not study the longitudinal impacts of the intervention. However, action research is a cyclical process and not conclusive and the results are neither right or wrong (Mertler, 2014). Further, it requires critical analysis resulting in tentative solutions for educational workplaces. The findings of the action research study will help develop and refine solutions to continue to

improve employee engagement within higher education and other organizations. While I anticipated immediate and more positive outcomes, I am cognizant of the nature of action research and look forward to seeing how this intervention will continue to improve employee engagement levels among student services professionals in the long-term.

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APPENDIX A

CYCLE 1 SURVEY INSTRUMENT

## Student Services Manager Engagement Survey

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Expectations at work</b>						
<i>I know what is expected of me at work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor sets clear expectations...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I find the expectations of my job reasonable...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I know what is required of me for my performance evaluation...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Recognition of good work</b>						
<i>I have received recognition or praise for doing good work in the past 7 days...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I know what my supervisor thinks of the quality of my work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor finds ways to recognize me for doing quality work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My peers find ways to recognize me for doing quality work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Connection to the mission or purpose</b>						
<i>I know the mission of Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I know the mission of MC Student Services Division...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I know how my role connects to the mission of the MC Student Services Division...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I am engaged in the mission and purpose of MC student support services and programs...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Opportunity to learn and grow</b>						
<i>I have had the opportunity to learn something new related to my job in the last month...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I feel supported in growing professionally as</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1

*a manager at Merced  
College...*

<i>Merced College provides sufficient internal professional development training for managers...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
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<i>Merced College provides supports sufficient external professional development training for managers...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
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APPENDIX B

CYCLE 1 MANAGER INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

### **Student Services Manager Interview Questions**

1. In the last several months we have engaged in professional development and training programs to address four areas of employee engagement:
  - a. Expectations at work are clear
  - b. Recognition of good work
  - c. Connection to the mission or purpose
  - d. Opportunity to learn and growIn what ways have you grown professionally in each of the four areas?
2. Did the professional development training program change your perceptions of employee engagement? If so, how? If not, why?
3. How would you describe the professional development and training program related to employee engagement?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving future iterations of professional development and training programs related to employee engagement?
5. In what ways has the employee engagement professional development and training program benefitted the employees within your department/program?
6. What did you learn about yourself as a manager as a result of this professional development and training program?
7. What else would you like for me to know regarding your perceptions and/or opinions related to this professional development and training program?

## APPENDIX C

### EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY INSTRUMENT

## Student Services Employee Engagement Survey

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Expectations at work</b>						
<i>I know what is expected of me at work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor sets clear expectations for my job performance...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I understand how my job performance is evaluated...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Recognition of good work</b>						
<i>I have received recognition or praise from someone at Merced College for doing good work in the past 7 days...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor finds ways to recognize me for doing quality work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My colleagues find ways to recognize me for doing quality work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Connection to the mission or purpose</b>						
<i>I know the mission of Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I know how my role supports or advances the mission of Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I believe in the mission of Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Opportunity to learn and grow</b>						
<i>I feel supported in growing professionally at Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>Merced College provides sufficient <u>internal</u> professional development and training opportunities...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>Merced College provides sufficient <u>external</u> professional development and training opportunities...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1



<b>Resources and materials to do job</b>						
<i>I have the resources and materials to do my job well...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>When I need additional resources or materials to do my job, I am able to request them through Merced College's resource allocation process...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor ensures I have the resources and materials I need to do my job...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Opportunity to do what you do best at work</b>						
<i>I have the opportunity to use my knowledge, skills, and talents in my job...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor helps me find ways to use my strengths and talents in my current role...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I am doing what I do best every day in my current role at Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Supervisor, or someone at work, cares about you as a person</b>						
<i>My colleagues care about me as a person...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor cares about me as a person...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>Merced College cares about me as a person...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Someone at work encourages development</b>						
<i>My colleagues encourage my professional development...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor encourages my professional development...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>Merced College supports and encourages professional development...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Opinions seem to count</b>						
<i>My professional opinions seem to count among my peers...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor values my professional opinions...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1

<i>My professional opinions are considered in program review and other planning processes...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Commitment to quality work</b>						
<i>I am committed to quality work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My colleagues are committed to doing quality work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>My supervisor is committed to quality work...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Working relationships with colleagues</b>						
<i>I have positive working relationships with my colleagues at Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I have a positive working relationship with my supervisor at Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>Merced College supports building positive working relationships and friendships...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Goals and progress in the workplace</b>						
<i>I have personally set goals around my professional progress in the workplace...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>I care about my professional progress at Merced College...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<i>Someone at Merced College has talked to me about my goals and progress in the workplace in the past six months...</i>	6	5	4	3	2	1

## Demographics Survey Questions

### What gender describes you?

- ☐ Male  
☐ Female  
☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

### What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Hispanic or Latino

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your highest degree earned?**

- ☐ High school diploma or GED
- ☐ Associate Degree
- ☐ Bachelor Degree
- ☐ Master Degree
- ☐ Doctorate Degree
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Please enter the four-digit year (e.g. 1982, 1999, 2007) of your first year of employment within MCCD:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please select your primary campus location (choose one):**

- ☐ Merced Campus
- ☐ Los Banos Campus
- ☐ Business Resource Center
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Please select the employee classification that best describes your status (choose one):**

- ☐ Classified Professional
- ☐ Faculty
- ☐ Management

**Please select the field that best describes your status (choose one):**

- ☐ Part-time
- ☐ Full-time
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Please select the division you belong to within the district (choose one):**

- ☐ Administrative Services
- ☐ Instruction
- ☐ Student Services
- ☐ President's Office (Human Resources, Information Technology Services, Institutional Effectiveness, Advancement Office)

**Please indicate your age group:**

- ☐ <25
- ☐ 25-29
- ☐ 30-34
- ☐ 35-39

- ☐ 40-44
- ☐ 45-49
- ☐ 50-54
- ☐ 55-59
- ☐ 60-64
- ☐ 65+

**Thank You for participating in the MCCD Employee Engagement Survey!**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this survey, then please do not hesitate to contact me directly at [chris.vitelli@mccd.edu](mailto:chris.vitelli@mccd.edu) or 209-384-6100.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX D

ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE

## Student Services Division Employee Engagement Action Plan



Manager:

Department/Program:

Construct	Strategies for Improvement	Action Steps	Deadline(s)	Resources	Observed Outcomes*
• INSERT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT CONSTRUCT	• TEXT	• TEXT	• TEXT	• TEXT	• TEXT

\* Each observed outcome should consider which of Kahn's psychological conditions were met as part of the intervention/strategy: 1) Meaningfulness, 2) Safety and/or 3) Availability

## APPENDIX E

### SAMPLE MANAGER CUSTOMIZED ACTION PLAN

## Student Services Division Employee Engagement Action Plan



Manager: [REDACTED]

Department/Program: [REDACTED]

Construct	Strategies for Improvement	Action Steps	Deadline(s)	Resources	Observed Outcomes*
Q04: Recognition and Praise	Q04: Send weekly totals to staff of students served with note of how much their work is appreciated. Q04: Provide periodic individualized praise and recognition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Q04: Query SARS by staff at the end week.</li> <li>Q04: Send total to individual staff with a message each week.</li> </ul>	Q04: Weekly through October 1, 2018	Q04: Time to run reports and send e-mails.	Q04: Meaningfulness
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Q04: Create notes and candy packets and leave on staff desks when caught going above and beyond.</li> </ul>	Q04: Ongoing through October 1, 2018	Q04: Time and supplies to create notes and candy.	Q04: Meaningfulness
Q02: Resources and Materials	Q02: Create a process for requesting one off needed supplies. Create a process for voting by the entire team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Q02: Develop and write process to request resources/materials.</li> <li>Q02: Develop voting scale for consistency.</li> <li>Q02: Create process as a standing agenda item for bi-monthly meetings.</li> </ul>	Q02: June 30, 2018	Q02: Time; Funding for requested items.	Q02: Meaningfulness Q02: Availability
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Q12: Research and develop list.</li> <li>Q12: Send list to all staff.</li> </ul>	Q12: Monthly through October 1, 2018	Q12: Time Q12: Potential training fees	Q12: Safety

\* Each observed outcome should consider which of Kahn's psychological conditions were met as part of the intervention/strategy: 1) Meaningfulness, 2) Safety and/or 3) Availability



## APPENDIX F

### EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

### **Student Services Employee Engagement Interview Questions**

1. In your opinion, what is the purpose and value of employee engagement?
2. How would you characterize your personal level of engagement as an employee at Merced College?, and why do you describe yourself in that way?
3. In a recent employee engagement survey at Merced College, the following three elements were the lowest:
  - a. Recognition and praise of good work
  - b. Opportunity to learn and grow
  - c. Resources and materials to do job

In your opinion, why do you think these are the lowest elements of employee engagement at Merced College?

4. Do these three lowest elements of employee engagement relate to you personally as an employee at Merced College? Why or why not?
5. As a [*classified professional, faculty or manager*] for Merced College, how do you think we can improve employee engagement, specifically with the four lowest elements identified from the survey?
6. For each of the lowest three elements, please share your thoughts and ideas on how we can improve each of them. If possible, provide examples of specific interventions, campaigns, and/or programs.
  - a. Recognition and praise of good work
  - b. Opportunity to learn and grow
  - c. Resources and materials to do job
7. What else would you like for me to know regarding your perceptions and/or opinions related to employee engagement at Merced College?